

IRISH Writing

EDITED BY DAVID MARCUS & TERENCE SMITH



THE MAGAZINE OF CONTEM-
PORARY IRISH LITERATURE

26

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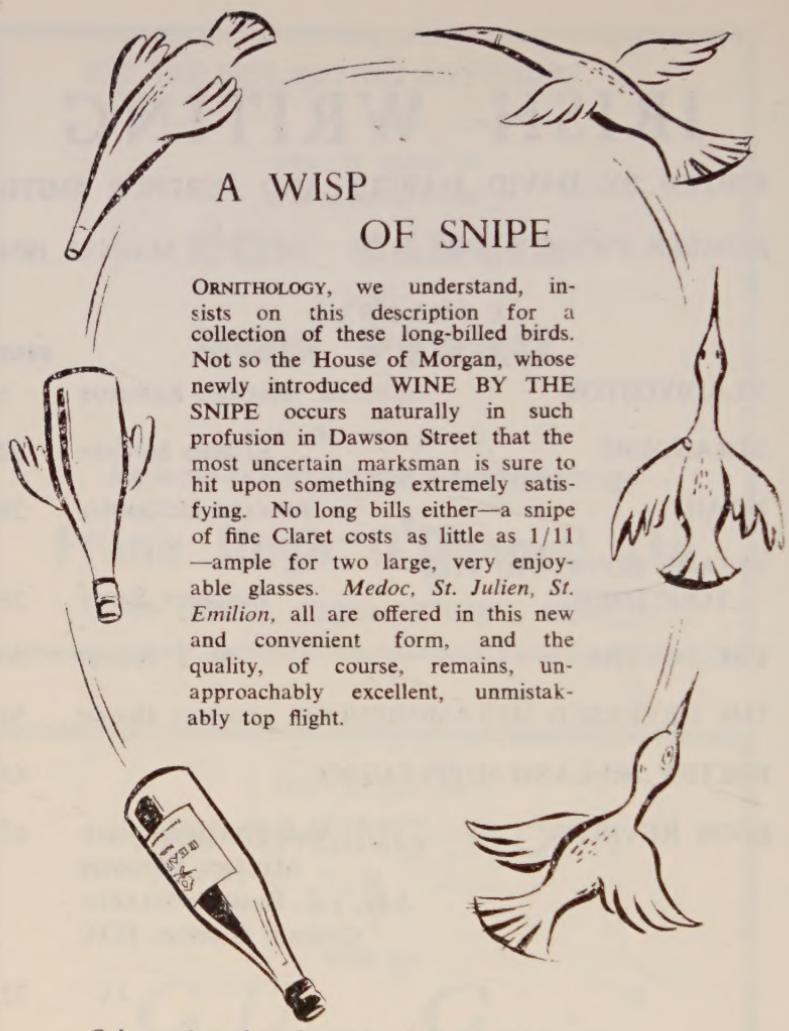
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A WISP OF SNIPE

ORNITHOLOGY, we understand, insists on this description for a collection of these long-billed birds. Not so the House of Morgan, whose newly introduced WINE BY THE SNIPE occurs naturally in such profusion in Dawson Street that the most uncertain marksman is sure to hit upon something extremely satisfying. No long bills either—a snipe of fine Claret costs as little as 1/11—ample for two large, very enjoyable glasses. *Medoc, St. Julien, St. Emilion*, all are offered in this new and convenient form, and the quality, of course, remains, unapproachably excellent, unmistakably top flight.

Other wines by the snipe—many others—await your inspection and approval at a closer range. Now is the time to organise an expedition to Dawson Street—one half-crown will be ample in the way of equipment.

THE HOUSE OF
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36 DAWSON STREET, DUBLIN

OK-B.

VLADIVOSTOK

Now-a-days (as Sir Thomas Maleore wrote some centuries ago) men cannot love seven night but they must have all their desires, that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded, and hasty heat, soon it cooleth. This is no stability, but the old love was not so. Men and women could love together seven years, and no wanton lusts were between them, and then was love truth and faithfulness. And lo in likewise was used love in king Arthur's days. (Nowadays one has not seven years to spare).

I

It was a day in early May, with a crisp breeze and a cold turbulent sea. Joe Walsh trotted briskly up the beach, swinging his arms vigorously and nodding his head to shake the water out of his ears. Across wet sand, across a fringe of seaweed, across dry powdery sand, to the shingle at the foot of the sea-wall that edged the promenade, where his clothes were heaped under an old raincoat. He bent down to drag his shirt from the tangle of clothes.

"Well, Tarzan," said a voice overhead, "how was it?" Joe looked up, startled, at the girl sitting on the wall, huddled into a heavy coat. How long had she been there? She had a curiously small, white face, spotted with dark freckles, and topped by an untidy mop of jet-black hair, the colour, and seemingly the consistency, of tarred barbed wire. A wicked little smile twisted a mouth on which too-light lipstick was smeared a shade too widely. Joe's nineteen years had not given him much practice in dealing with girls, especially girls who wore wicked little smiles and too-light lipstick. He stood speechless with his shirt trailing at his side.

"Well?" she asked again, and the smile broadened.

"Oh," he said, "grand. Grand. At least, it's grand when you get in. But if you're going swimming, watch out for the undertow. It's a holy terror to-day."

"Me?" she said, in horror. "Is it me get into that water? I leave that to people with no scrap of sense."

Joe was suddenly conscious that he was blushing all over. He struggled damply into the tangled folds of his shirt, emerging, breathless and clammy, with his hair standing up in spikes. He slipped out of his trunks, wriggled into his trousers, flattened his

hair onto his skull with the palms of both hands, and jammed his feet into his already laced shoes. He slammed the wet trunks against his shin to rid them of sand, stuffed them into one pocket of the raincoat and threw the coat over his arm. He was dressed and ready to go home.

"Well, my God," said the girl, "but you're hardy characters around this terrible place. Don't you ever catch cold?"

"No," said Joe, shuffling his feet in the shingle as though he had dropped a coin and was looking for it, "why should we? Nothing healthier than sea-water."

He took a last look around the strand, then began to scramble up the steepening curve of the wall. She reached over and grabbed his wrist as he came near the top, and heaved with surprising strength. He leaped over onto the promenade, and it seemed that her hand lingered on his wrist for a brief moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Funny time for holidays," said Joe, "I suppose you are on holidays? I know every sinner in this town and I've never seen you before."

"I suppose so," she said, looking round at the deserted promenade, the empty strand, the closed houses with unweeded gardens. "Cheerful little graveyard you've got here. I saw a date over a doorway in the town. Fourteen hundred and something. Funny thing: it was the newest-looking house in the street. What is there to do around here?"

"Oh," said Joe, "there's a dance twice a week at the Pavilion, and the Technical students have a play at the Town Hall. And then there's the pictures, of course."

"That's right," she said, "the pictures. A revival of 'Ben Hur,' and a Western I saw four times already. And three days before the next dance. A mad whirl of pleasure. What wouldn't I give for a good swing band right now!" Her toes tapped out a rhythm on the concrete.

"Smoke?" asked Joe, digging a twisted cigarette-packet from the corner of a pocket. He scratched a match on his thumbnail. The smoke curled away on a gust of wind which blew sharp sand and scraps of paper against their faces. They turned, huddling into coat-collars, to face out along the long curve of yellow strand that reached for miles towards a hazy headland. In all those miles nothing stirred, except little sand-devils whirling in the wind.

"What do you do to kill the time?" she asked.

"I never thought about it much," said Joe, "I suppose I let it live." He laughed suddenly. "I swim a lot, from April to November. Once I kept it up right through the year, but it gets a bit too dangerous in winter. See those rocks there?" She followed the line of his pointing finger. She saw a line of great jagged chunks of masonry standing some short distance

away from the foot of the sea-wall. "That's the remains of the old wall," he said. "Some of those rocks weighed a half-ton. It only took one good storm and—" He clicked his fingers expressively.

"I see," she said, shivering.

"I play a lot of billiards in the winter. And of course, I fish most of the time."

"Fish—" she said. She stood up. "Well—. The only good thing I see about this place is that I'll only be seeing it for one day more. The boss's aunt died and I got a couple of days off, like it or not, and then back to the grindstone again. So I got a mad notion to come down here because I'd heard so much about it! God help us all."

"Ah, now," said Joe, "it isn't fair to judge it by to-day. On a Bank Holiday week-end you couldn't cross the road there for the press of cars, and you couldn't see a square foot of strand for people. Every house open and lighted up, and wirelesses playing. The two dance-halls going full strength, and a fun-fair down there by the railway station, and coloured lights all over the place. The crowd in the station-yard, waiting for the last train home, and dancing half the night to melodeon-music. Every pub in the town with its doors bulging, and people with red raw sunburn eating ice-cream at midnight. Not that I'd enjoy that carry-on, mind you, but the visitors seem to. Give me the autumn any time."

"You can have the autumn," she said sadly, "if I can have the Bank Holiday. Now I have to go home to dinner. I'm going to get my money's worth, if it kills me."

"Where are you staying, by the way?" asked Joe. "I didn't think any of the hotels were open yet."

"They aren't really. See that place across on the back road?" She pointed away across the marsh and the railway line, away to a squat building with ugly iron verandas and a purple-slated roof. "That's the joint. They said first they weren't open yet, but then I think their greed got the better of them. But I suppose when they came to their senses they realised they'd be losing money by opening the place for one customer, and they're certainly letting me know it. Guest of honour, that's me." She looked at her watch. "Oh God, I'll be late for dinner, and all they want is the excuse."

"No, you won't," said Joe. "You've got ten minutes, and there's a short cut across the marsh, though you'd never get over by yourself without getting stuck in the mud. Here, follow me."

He led the way across the road, along a narrow passage-way between two houses, through a gap in a fence, and down an embankment onto open swampy ground, tufted with tall rushes. She followed him cautiously, stumbling occasionally and swearing softly. "Damn peep-toe shoes anyway," she said, "every grain

of sand and every drop of wet goes in and never comes out again."

"Now watch it," he said, "and only step where I've stepped before you. Otherwise you'll be up to your neck in it." He began to zig-zag slowly towards the railway-line, following the remnants of a causeway whose stones had sunk below the surface of the mud but left a mossy and slightly firmer footing. They paused at the tracks to let a goods-train go slowly by; a cloud of smoke came chokingly down on them and drifted off over the swamp. They crossed the line, she staggering uncomfortably on the sharp-edged ballast between the sleepers.

"Now," he said, "this is the worst bit, because there isn't any path, but if you grab the tail of my coat you'll be all right." She did so, without a word, and they went on, hopping warily from one clump of weeds to the next. Once she gave a muffled gasp, and once she tugged so hard at his coat that he nearly overbalanced. At last they came to the road.

He vaulted the stone stile and turned to give her a hand. She stood on top of the low wall, shoes muddy, cheeks flaming, black hair straggling over her forehead and a broad grin on her face. She was triumphantly waving a yard-long, sword-shaped leaf, with black mud clinging to its roots. "Well," she said, "we made it!"

"We did," said Joe. "Where did you pick up the felestrum?"

"Felestrum?" she said, enquiringly.

"That thing," he said, pointing. "The flagger . . . Wild iris, I think, is the right name."

"Oh," she said, "so that's what they're called. I pulled it out of the swamp the time I nearly pulled you off your feet. I thought it'd be a shame to die without having some souvenir of a lovely holiday." She wrinkled her nose at him and waved the flagger about her head. "Wild iris. Wild Iris—that's me—I grow wild in the bushes!"

She brandished the green sword again and jumped down abruptly from the wall. Automatically, he caught her, and staggered a few paces into the road. She was unexpectedly heavy. He stood there, foolishly holding her, until she pushed herself gently away.

"Dinnertime," she said. "The name's Iris, in case you hadn't guessed."

"Mine's Joe," he said. "Good luck for now," and walked away, confused. He turned once, and saw her standing still by the wall, the wild iris trailing at her side. She waved; the green blade had been bent, and flapped like a broken wing.

II

The old town slept content in the mildness of afternoon, now that the sharp breeze had been transformed to a gentle drift of air. The stretch of dun-coloured mud left between the dock

walls by a falling tide seemed molten in the sunlight. Small boats sprawled athwart the mud, and tiny green crabs scuttled about in the shadow of leaning gunwales. Yawning black caverns in the smooth mud showed where Joe had spent a couple of hours' furious activity in digging lug-worms. He came slowly up the slipway, in one hand a heavy shovel, in the other a bucket half-full of the lumpy, bristly, liver-coloured creatures. There were splashes of mud on his face and a rent in the knee of his trousers.

"Yoo-hoo," called a light voice. He looked up and saw Iris coming along the street, kicking her heels like a little girl playing hopscotch. He waited until she came nearer.

"Well, the hard-working man. So we meet again. What have you got in the bucket?"

"Worms," he said. "See."

She peered cautiously into the bucket, then clutched at her throat. "Ugh, they're disgusting. Take them away. What are you going to do—eat them?"

"Good God, no!" said Joe. "I'll use them for bait, of course. Maybe catch a few sand-dabs, or even a bass."

"Well, that's a relief, anyway," she said. "I've never seen anything so horrible. When you said worms I thought you meant the little pink earthworms. They're bad enough, the wriggly things—. But these—! I'll have nightmares for a week."

Maybe I should tell her they've got greeny-yellow blood, thought Joe, gloating a little—that'd finish her completely. They stood there at the side of the dock, looking at one another dubiously.

"Well," she said, "what are you going to do for the rest of the evening? Dig up more worms?"

"No," said Joe, "I'm going up the embankment as far as the bridge to look for pill-crabs."

"Mind if I come too? I'm rightly fed-up with myself."

"Pleased," said Joe. "It's a nice walk on a fine evening." He laid the bucket of worms beside the wall and propped the blade of the shovel over the top of it.

"Will it be safe there?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, surprised. "Who'd be bothered stealing it in this place? We're terrible honest here—in small things, anyway."

They went laughing along the wide dusty deserted street where dogs slept on the pavement. They walked in the shadow of a tall warehouse whose walls were crumbling, whose windows were blocked with sheets of rusty corrugated iron. They passed the market-house in a cobbled square where a laneway came in under a Norman watergate, and came out on the fair green, a wide uneven space of sparse grass and tall thistles, with a great rusty anchor lying in the middle of it like a stranded whale. To

their left, seagulls and crows squabbled over a dump. Farther out, a gannet dropped spearing slantwise from high air into the slack-tide estuary. There was no other sign of life or movement.

They climbed a gentle slope to the top of the embankment. On one side weed-covered boulders dropped steeply away to where grey water sucked and gurgled. On the other side a grassy incline went down to a salt-meadow, rank with brown weeds, where a few cows grazed forlornly in the distance. A long narrow muddy pond ran parallel with the embankment, its steely surface jagged with tiny ripples.

The breeze frolicked about them as they stood unsheltered, gazing at the wide and featureless prospect. Off on their left stretched the estuary, current curling serpent-like across its leaden surface, a trail of yellow swirling foam marking the dividing-line between the slate-blue sea-water and the muddy river channel. A salmon jumped far out on the edge of slack water. A cormorant bobbed along, sleek head nodding, in the channel. The breeze carried a sour smell of mud and weed. Iris pushed out her chin and shook her hair out of her eyes. "Oh," she said softly, "this is nice."

Joe looked at her, astonished. Then he looked back at the familiar scenery, trying to visualise it through unfamiliar eyes. It still looked the same. "Come on," he said at last, "let's go to the bridge." She skipped ahead along the embankment, leaping nimbly over the broken places where burdocks grew among tumbled stones, while he followed, alert for a stumble.

They came to where a barbed wire fence ran from the edge of the pond, up along the bank and across the path, rudely barring their way. She looked inland over the brown-olive herbage of the salt meadow. "How deep is the pond?" she asked. "Is there anything in it?"

"Shallow enough," said Joe. "We used to swim there when we were kids, but there are thousands of springs coming up through the mud and wherever there's a spring there's a quicksand, so when we got sense we gave it up. See that rough patch on the water, over near the little bush?"

"Where? Oh—. Yes, I see it now. What is it?"

"That's a school of mullet. The place is full of them. Cutest fish in the sea, and you can't catch them. If you try to net them, they jump the net. You could use two nets and take them by surprise, but it takes a lot of boats and who's going to bother?"

"Why not?"

"To tell you the God's truth," said Joe, "they taste like wet flannel. But I wish you could see some baby mullet. They're little silver things about the length of your thumb-nail, perfect little fish all the same, and they swim in perfect formation in little squads of five or six, spread out across a patch about

the size of your hand, and their little tails are buzzing so fast you can hardly see them, and they're all swimming like the devil and getting no place much. You'd like them. But you're a couple of months too early." He stopped, embarrassed by his own enthusiasm and the slight grin on her face.

"Yes," she said, "and I've got to go home tomorrow morning. Think it'd be worth my while coming back?" There was something in the sideways tilt of her black head that suddenly reminded him of a sleek dark cormorant speculatively eyeing a sprat, and ready to pounce.

He grabbed the fence-post that leaned out from the seaward side of the embankment and swung nimbly around it, then with foot and hand opened a gap between the strands wide enough for her to scramble through. Her shoulders brushed against him as she straightened up, and the wire twanged from his fingers in abrupt resolution. But she was already some yards away along the bank.

III

He walked a few paces and stopped, looking meditatively at a great thatch of olive-coloured weed on the rocks below. "Hey!" he shouted to Iris, "wait a minute for me." He began to scramble down the embankment towards the grey heaving water. She turned, paused, and slowly strolled back, hands in pockets, head bowed.

"Well, little man," she said, "what now?"

"Pill-crabs," he said, looking up from his scrabbling in the weeds and among crevices of rocks. "Remember, I told you?"

"I must see this," she said excitedly. He looked up, startled at the sound of her heels slipping on smooth water-worn rocks, and looked away, blushing. She recovered her balance, casually smoothed down her skirt, and came to stand beside him among the weeds, careless of the oily moisture that soaked her shoes.

He grabbed at a hunk of slippery bladder-wrack and pulled it away together with the fist-sized rock to which its roots were fastened. In the puddle of dark water that filled the cavity, something scurried. He plunged in his hand and brought out a pair of crabs—a big dark one with great claws, one of which tightly enfolded a smaller, yellow-green crab whose claws were curled to rest. He threw away the bigger crab and turned with the other in his hand.

"See?" he said. "There's a pill-crab for you." He twisted one of the crab's sharp walking-legs, which cracked and pulled away like a torn sleeve; beneath, like an optical illusion, remained a soft, limp, yellow-green replica of the shell, perfect in every detail even to the minute dark serrations at the tip of the claw. "It's the same all over, the new shell grown under the old one that will be cast in a few days' time. And then,

for the few days the shell is hardening, the crab is quite helpless—can't even move about. That's why it goes away and hides in a crack of the rock. That's the best bait in the world for bass."

"But what about the other crab?" asked Iris. "The big one? Is it protecting the small one?"

"I doubt it," said Joe. "I'll bet it's only waiting for the small one to cast its shell so that it can eat it. I remember once I thought I had a sweet in my pocket and it turned out to be a pill-crab—after I swallowed it. Tasty."

"Good God," said Iris, "that's disgusting."

He hardly heard her above the noise he was making, tearing away great clumps of seaweed and rolling rocks aside. He had taken a tightly-rolled small sack from his pocket, dipped it into the water and laid it among the weeds. As he came upon a crab he popped it into the sack. "That should do," he said at last, straightening up.

She climbed up the bank, wincing now as her feet squelched in the weed. "Mind!" he warned. "That stuff's shocking slippery." She grinned over her shoulder and went sure-footedly on. He began to follow, stepped on a loose stone which twisted sideways under him, fell on his back and skidded down the weedy slope until he was up to his knees in sea water. She gave a small scream, then, as he sat up, shaking his head, she collapsed on the edge of the embankment and began to bellow with laughter. He scrambled up the rocks, carrying the sack from which trails of water dripped on his sodden trousers. She was rocking from side to side, her arms clutching her sides and her hair swinging over her face. In a moment he began to laugh also. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet and they clung together on the path until the fit of laughter passed and they went on, arm in arm, towards the bridge.

IV

The path widened out into a level space the size of a tennis-court, covered with pebbles and tufts of dry grass, where the bridge, the roadway and the embankment met. They walked along the smooth tarred surface of the bridge, that rang hollow under foot, until they came to the swinging middle section, floored with uneven wooden blocks. They leaned over the latticed iron parapet, gazing down at the weed-fringed piers that looked like deserted barges at the deep channel surging and boiling between the piers and fanning away downstream in a line of small whirlpools. Gulls—black-backed, brown-backed, or snowy white—bobbed on the wavelets or fluttered suddenly into the air. Staring at the smoothly racing water, one felt the bridge to be toppling slowly backwards; it was a relief to look up and

away to the mouth of the estuary and the two hills that guarded it.

One side of the estuary was a wide stretch of muddy slob-land and a coast road which turned out of sight along a valley where a little stream came down to meander through the mud-flats. On the other side was the long line of the embankment by which they had come. Headlands came round to hold the harbour in an arm-grasp, one bare, rocky, scattered with small plantations of pine-trees, the other straggled with the houses of the town and a lighthouse perched clean and white against the sky.

Upstream, a little river came in under a low twin-arched stone bridge. Cattle stood knee-deep in its shallow waters. A heron rose from its one-legged stance near the bank and flapped clumsily away, like a tablecloth blown from a clothesline by a sudden storm. The angle between the tributary and the main stream was filled by a promontory shaggy with pines, over which pylons strode away into the distance. Around and behind the promontory the foam-flecked river went twisting out of sight. The breeze sighed softly overhead, and squabbling seagulls sounded like rusty hacksaws.

Iris leaned back, her elbows resting on the rusty parapet, and looked up the river. "It's wonderful," she said, and drew a deep breath. "I remember seeing a travel-film once about the Rhine. It looked just the same."

"That's what they tell me," said Joe. "It keeps twisting about for the next twenty miles, and woods all the way. If you go up in a boat you have to keep switching from one side to the other to keep out of the current, and sometimes you get so close to the bank you could nearly touch it, and the leaves hang down and almost brush against your face. And there are little cliffs where there always seems to be a goat looking down at you. It's nice all right. In the summer the Corporation runs trips up the river in motor-boats a couple of times a week. You'd like that, but you're too early in the year for it."

"Yeah," she said sourly, "too early. Everything's either too early or too late in this damn town." She picked up a pebble and hurled it savagely into the river. "Why does nothing ever happen *now*? I haven't got all my life to wait. Why doesn't someone get some action around here?" She looked at him, and her mouth was a pale straight line. The bag of crabs dripped audibly against his shins.

The long silence was broken by the sound of a labouring engine. An old lorry came creaking over the bridge and pulled groaningly to a stop. The driver stuck his head through the empty window-frame and wiped the perspiration from his face with the back of a floury hand. "Hey, Joe," he shouted across, "what time is it?"

"Devil a know I know, Steve," said Joe. Hardly had he spoken than the sound of bells came softly across the water. "There's the Angelus," he said. "I didn't think it was that late."

"Oh, Lord," said Iris, "my watch must have stopped."

"Do you want a lift into town?" asked Steve.

"Yes," said Iris, "but certainly. It'll save me from starvation." She ran across and got in beside the driver.

"How about you, Joe?" he asked. "You'll have to get on behind."

"Good enough," said Joe, "provided her ladyship has the comfort." He vaulted up onto the flat floor of the lorry and sat on a pile of dusty sacks, his back to the wall of the cab and the sack of crabs heaving and wriggling beside him. The lorry began, shudderingly, to move. Everything in the back bounced madly at the slightest unevenness in the road. He could hardly hear their voices over the roar of the engine, but they seemed in merry humour. Trust Steve, he thought, with mingled annoyance and amusement. He heard Iris's voice raised in song. He caught a fragment of the meandering ballad—"Blackpool girls are fine an' tall. Up again' de Sunbeam wall, Here's—" Then the noise blotted it out again.

The boys of Fair Hill, he thought; they'd give you some action fast enough. I'm a fine hero, he thought, myself and my sack of pill-crabs. And then the lorry leaped and jounced over the pot-holes that mark the approach to every small seaside town, and he grabbed at the sack just in time to stop it from sliding into the road. Inside the wet canvas the crabs bubbled and scrabbled indignantly as if to give proof that they still survived.

They passed under an old sandstone archway that straddled and strangled the main street, and the echo of the engine roared deafeningly down at them. They pulled up where a narrow side-street went down between leaning houses towards the harbour. Steve stuck his head around the side of the cab. "This do you, Joe?" he asked.

"Sure," said Joe, hopping down to the path. "Safe home. See you on Saturday."

Iris looked out the window and waved casually as the lorry moved away. Joe stood there for a moment, then turned down the side-street. I wonder, he said to himself, how she'll like it when she finds that Steve lives twenty miles farther on? Poor girl, you'll have a lonely last evening after all. He laughed, doubtfully, and swung the dripping sack of doomed crabs.

V

Evening came clear and breathless. A wisp of fog trailed over the glassy sea and made a brownish band against the lemon-

coloured sky on the horizon. Swallows flew far above. The light lingered, but a dim blue haziness blurred the outlines of the old warehouses, the crumbling archway, the boats riding at anchor in slack water. Inside the ugly building that housed the social club, the shadows gathered. Joe wandered restlessly around the deserted billiard-room, reluctant to switch on the light and acknowledge another day's end. Sheeted tables loomed shapelessly in the gloom.

He switched on the wireless and switched it off again before it uttered more than a crackle of static. He picked up a magazine and carried it to the window, twisting it in an attempt to catch the fading light, but the print swam before his eyes and he threw the magazine on a seat. He walked to the empty fireplace and stared at the dim dusty trophies in their glass-case, its green baize faded to a streaky olive. He tapped his foot on the fender and listened to the dull ringing sound. There was nothing to hold his roving mind.

He began to whistle softly, until the tune turned into "The Boys of Fair Hill" and died away. He walked to the door, then, with his hand already on the light switch, he paused for a moment, irresolute. The clock ticked away loudly in the stillness, groaned and wheezed and struck nine. The sound sank into the shadows. Joe pulled open the door abruptly and went down the steps, to cool evening air and gravel that crunched underfoot.

A star glimmered in the east and night lurked, waiting, in corners. On the empty promenade a sea-breeze came salt and weedy. Waves hushed and whispered far down the strand. On top of the cliff the air had a tang of blooming furze. Strange colourings wavered over the flat marshy land below, where the railway line ran off out of sight and the green jewel of a distant signal was the only point of focus in a featureless landscape. Distance and size were alike deceptive. The factory on the upper road seemed no bigger than a matchbox, while small bushes seemed immense vague presences.

He walked softly along the grassy edge of the cliff, glancing down occasionally at the shingle far below. Then, at his feet, there was a startled gasp, so unexpected that he almost tripped and fell. A figure rose from a ledge just below, and a white face glimmered at him.

"Who's that?" said a frightened voice. "Damn it, why do you walk so quiet?" After a moment he recognised her.

"So it's you," he said. "You must be frozen."

"Yes," she said. "I was just sitting here and thinking and killing time. I hadn't realised it was so cold." She clambered stiffly up onto the grass and they walked together down the landward slope of the cliff, aimlessly.

"How did you get on with Steve?" he asked.

"Steve?" she said. "Oh. Oh, yes. He wanted me to meet him on Friday." She laughed harshly. "Friday," she said again. "Only tomorrow comes before Friday."

The ground levelled off beneath their feet. They climbed a breakwater and found themselves among the sand-dunes that backed the strand. Their shoes slipped on spiky rushes and wiry marram-grass on the crests, and their feet floundered in the soft sandy hollows. Here the breeze was above their heads; they came to a bowl-shaped hollow, a few yards across, where the sand was streaked with grass like hair on a bald head. "I'm tired," she said, sitting down and curling her feet under her, "let's rest a while."

"Cigarette?" he said.

"Nice," she said. The match flared with an unexpectedly loud sound and she closed her eyes against the glare. The cigarette wavered and burned unevenly. Then the match-flame quivered and died, and there were only the two glowing coals in the growing darkness. She looked up at his face as it was illuminated by the pulsing light. She leaned back on one arm and yelped suddenly. "Something bit me," she said in a tone of terror. Joe took a swift pace forwards, leaning a hand on her shoulder, and looked where her fingers had rested.

"It's only a sea-thistle," he said, laughing. He struck another match, and in the leaping yellow light she saw the pale streaky jade stem, the wickedly-spined grey-green leaves, the wine-coloured savage blossom, delicate-looking as bone china and tough as steel. "Oh," she said, "it's beautiful!" She touched the blossom incautiously and yelped again, for each soft-seeming pink tendril was a needle-sharp spine. "But unfriendly," she said, sadly, and looked up at Joe again.

He stood there, looking down at her, the cigarette smouldering away between his fingers. A little gust of wind, barbed with sand, came frisking over the dunes, and she shivered under his fingers. "You *are* cold," he said, straightening up. "Wait a moment." He remembered something he had glimpsed in the matchlight. He searched around at the base of the sand-dune and unearthed a couple of pieces of driftwood. He crumpled up some scraps of blown newspaper, broke driftwood in fragments over his knee, and built a small fire which blazed up rapidly. He dragged along more pieces of wood from the next hollow and fed them into the flames. As they burned away he kicked them further into the fire. The sand grew warm and they leaned back against the slope of the dune, barely an arm-stretch apart. Waves grumbled on shingle somewhere far away, and the night-wind whispered above. The darkness poised itself and waited above the bowl of firelight.

"I remember doing this," said Joe, "when we were kids.

We were smoking on the sly and we came out here one night with a packet of cigarettes and found we had only one match, so we had to light a fire to keep us going. Just as well too—January it was, as far as I remember."

"Adventurous childhood you had," said Iris, laughing. "All boys together. Give you a packet of cigarettes and you wanted nothing more. And I suppose you threw stones at the Girl Guides' camp?"

"Yes," said Joe, surprised, "we did that, and there was hell to pay afterwards. How did you guess?"

"I have the second sight, of course. I can foretell the future too. Boys will be boys, and girls will be—" she checked herself, leaned forward and threw the stub of the cigarette into the fire. A piece of wood fell over and the flames leaped up. Her eyes glittered and her teeth shone very white. "Damn it, I wish—." She took up a fistful of sand and let it sift slowly through her fingers. She glanced at him, and in the flicker of firelight he could not be certain of the expression on her face. "I'm sorry I came and I'm sorry to be going back. I don't know what way I am." She stared into the fire again.

Joe kicked his heels into the sand, digging out a little hollow. He squirmed his shoulders against the dune, until a trickle of sand ran down his collar. He looked at his hand, lying so still beside him. He looked at Iris's fire-bright profile a couple of feet away. He raised his hand, slowly, as though shoulder and elbow were frozen stiff. She stared, motionless, neither inviting nor forbidding, into the flames. He stretched out his hand towards her shoulder, but it was just beyond reach. The few inches of firelit darkness were a barrier which he could not summon the courage to cross. Moments crawled by, and his hand slowly dropped to his side again. She cupped her elbows in her palms and hunched her shoulders. The fire crackled and he gazed into its golden caverns until his eyes were tired. The moon came up, cold and pure.

His head snapped forward and jerked him awake. Iris was rocking from side to side and crooning what sounded like a Scottish lullaby. She looked sidelong, mockingly, at him. "Sleepy, poor boy?" she asked.

"No," said Joe, "no. Just dizzy from staring into the fire." He leaned forward and pushed timber into the flames. The light leaped up. Her eyes smiled at him, her lips curved. Now, he thought; what's stopping me; where's the harm in a bit of fun: kiss her, you fool. Then she laughed suddenly at the sight of him there against the fire, neck twisted awkwardly, brows furrowed in indecision.

"Have one of mine," she said, holding out a cigarette-packet. "As the farmer said when he came in and found his son at grips with the maid, 'You'll be smoking next.' Don't

look so dismal. *You* don't have to go back to-morrow."

The moment was gone. He pulled a red ember from the fire, scorching his fingers, and lit the cigarettes. He snuggled back against the dune. There was a coldness in his stomach that the fire's warmth could not reach. After a while she gave a little choking sound as though she had swallowed a puff of smoke, then began to hum again. He stared into the fire until it seemed an immense torch-lit street where a silent procession marched between huge dark buildings. The buildings wavered and loomed, growing nearer and nearer until they towered toppling over him.

He woke, stiff and half-frozen, some time later. By the position of the moon he judged it to be long past midnight. A thread of smoke rose up into the night air from the fire's last embers. He was quite alone. He rolled over slowly and painfully on the sand, and something clawed through his shirt and into his chest. He sat up and found that the sea-thistle had been laid beside him, torn off at the roots. He struck a match and saw that the sharp spines, broken in the struggle to uproot the plant, were tipped with tiny dark stains. He thought of her hands, soft small hands now torn and bleeding. He kicked sand over the fire until no gleam escaped, then began to stumble homeward over the moonlit dunes. He carried the thistle, unthinkingly, crushed in his palm.

VI

Joe's sleep was short and restless, disturbed by strange dreams of galloping white horses with black manes, which raced threateningly towards him down streets of tall houses and turned away, prancing, at the last moment. He woke, half-choked, to find the pillow on top of his face and the blankets strewn about the floor. The window was open, and the sound of bird-song came in to greet him. He went over and looked out at the estuary.

It was not long after dawn. The western sky was still grey. Nothing moved except the slow oily ripples of the tide near flood. A cold green-gold light lapped everything about, solidly, like Venetian glass; the anchored boats, drifted by the aimless eddies, pointed indiscriminately in all directions. On top of the water-bailiff's cream-painted launch a sea-gull perched and lazily preened its feathers. Far out on the other side of the channel a salmon came soaring and shuddering out of the water like a great electric spark. The ripples widened out, breaking mirrored images of sand, rocks, trees, buoys, boats, into trembling shafts of green and brown and gold. Joe took a deep, deep, peaceful breath and turned away, running his fingers through his tangled hair.

He picked up his clothes from where he had dropped them in

a heap at the foot of the bed, shrugged his way into them, and went down the stairs on tiptoe, barefoot. He picked up a hand-line and the bag of crabs, closed the door softly behind him ; a moment while he struggled into a pair of broken tennis-shoes, then he crossed the road, climbed the breakwater and dropped down to the beach.

An hour later he was still knee-deep in the icy wavelets, relaxed, looking out over the estuary and the smoothly-humped waters of the channel fifty yards away, feeling the sand dribbling away from under his feet as the back-tide scoured it away. The sun at last had cleared the sea-wall and was pleasantly warm on his back. The straining line tingled on his tensed fingers. He whistled cheerfully and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking with satisfaction at the empty shore and the wide empty sea.

There came a succession of soft tugs at the line. He slackened his grip slightly and let the cord slide slowly between finger and thumb. A yard of line had gone, by fractions of slow inches. He tightened his fingers, felt the live movement still there, and jerked his wrist back. The line jumped and sawed about as he heaved it in, careless now in what confusion the coils might drop. A bar of vibrant olive-silver came threshing, gills gaping, the spiky back-fin erect and ready to slash. Joe ran splashing in to the strand, dragging the bass yards clear of the water's edge. He left it there for a moment and came back with a chunk of rock. With one foot pressing the spines to rest, he measured his distance carefully and struck the fish on the small dark patch at the back of its head. Its gills opened and closed, it quivered violently, the olive tinge of its sides turned to blue and then to cold silver, and it lay still.

Joe twisted out the hook and lifted the bass happily with a finger through its gills. He dabbled it in the edge of the waves to wash the sand away, and looked at it proudly. Eight pounds, give or take a few ounces. It was moments like this that made fishing worth a man's whole life and exclusive devotion.

Cautiously he levered up the great back fin, which came up like a plume, translucent, ribbed with needle-sharp spines, gleaming in the sunlight. He touched the spines, cautiously, but sea-water had numbed his fingers and he pressed too hard before he felt the stab of pain. A tiny droplet of blood glittered on the spine like a splinter of ruby. A cloud seemed to pass over the sun and the splashed patches on his shirt became noticeably chill. The gold had gone out of the morning, and the sea was grey.

He wrinkled his forehead and looked through almost-closed lids at the sun, estimating time. Nearly eight o'clock. A quarter of an hour to spare, at best. He dragged in the coils of line and crammed them anyhow, tangled and weed-festooned, into the sack with the crabs, and ran away along the beach. The

tide had reached the corner of the tennis-court wall, but he splashed heedlessly through shin-deep water. He pulled the latch-cord of his own door, threw the sack in a corner, grabbed an old newspaper to wrap around the bass, and raced out again, letting the door bang loudly behind him. He ran along the streets of the old town, his shoes and his soaked trousers leaving trails of moisture on the grey pavements.

When he came as far as the lighthouse at the top of the hill, his heart was pounding at his ribs and his side hurt. Steam rose in great clouds beyond the station buildings. No belated travellers were in sight. He kept running, unsteadily. The platform clock, unbelievably, showed still four minutes to the hour. He waited a moment until his breath was more or less under control, then went through the barrier and walked along beside the train.

She was sitting in a corner-seat of an empty compartment, reading a film-magazine. He tapped the glass. She looked up, half-smiled, and opened the window.

"Well," she said, "if it isn't the Boy Scout himself. The last time I saw you, you were snoring fine and loud." She laughed abruptly. "Lucky there isn't anyone around to hear us. Your reputation would be ruined—and all for nothing."

"I've got something for you," said Joe. "Sorry the parcel is so clumsy, but I hadn't time—."

"Well, well," she said. She lifted a corner of the paper and peered in. Her eyes widened and she gave a muffled snort that might have been a laugh or a sob. "Well, now I've seen everything. Thanks. It was a nice thought. Now I'll have something to remember you by."

They looked at one another in silence, she resting her elbows on the frame of the window and stroking the red scratches on the palms of her hands, and Joe leaning a shoulder against the side of the carriage, his wet flannels sticking to his shins. Stray spurts of steam curled up from under the footboard and drifted between their faces. The station-master came out of the waiting-room, looked at the clock and went in again.

"Will you be coming back?" asked Joe. "When will you be coming back, I mean?"

"Did you ever hear the story about the Trans-Siberian Railway?" she asked. "No?" She took a deep breath, looked away up the line, and began to pick at a blister of paint on the window-frame. "Well, there was this Russian soldier and the Russian girl that got on the train in Moscow and they had the carriage all to themselves. And a fortnight later, when they had got to the middle of nowhere, the soldier says: 'It is cold.' And a fortnight after that, when they were passing through Omsk, the girl says: 'Yes, it is cold.' And a week later, when they left Tomsk, the soldier says: 'Would you like

the window closed?' And a week after that, when they got to Irkutsk, the girl says: 'Yes, I would like the window closed.' And a fortnight later, when they were still three weeks away from Vladivostok, the soldier stands up slowly and says: 'Enough of this love-talk—take off your clothes!' Iris looked down at him, unsmilingly. "They got married in Vladivostok and lived miserably ever after. Isn't that a nice story?"

Joe began to say something, but his words were lost in the deafening roar of escaping steam. The station-master came through the barrier with his furled green flag ready. He looked from his watch to the clock and back again. Joe put his hand, fingers still pallid and pasty from sea-water, on the window-frame. "Well?" he asked, and managed a grin.

"Enough of this love-talk," she said. "I'm not coming back. I'm off to Vladivostok in the morning. And you've missed the train."

The station-master waved his flag, the train shuddered and groaned into movement. A great cloud of steam billowed up between them, hiding her face, and he stepped back. When the steam cleared he saw her face at the window, already beyond reach, black tousled hair framing pale features. Her hand waved cheerfully. He raised his arm to shoulder-level, then, after a few moments, let it drop limply to his side again. The train went round a curve and she was lost to his sight.

He turned and went across the station yard, dragging his toes through the drifted sand. He went through the gateway and looked out at a grey sky and a grey tumbled sea. There were good fish in it yet, or so they said. A stout man came trotting towards the gate, carrying a suitcase and raincoat, breathless, red-faced, worried-looking. He gestured wildly as he came. "I'm sorry," said Joe politely, "I'm afraid you've missed your train." He left the stout man standing forlornly in the gateway and, shoes squelching desolately, went slowly home.

STRANGERS

AN EFFICIENT-LOOKING YOUNG LADY WITH A PLEASANT SMILE greeted him : "Good evening, Major Fagworth, terrible evening isn't it."

"Appalling," he smiled.

He had a disarming smile ; manageresses and waitresses seemed to remember him, seemed to like him, perhaps because he was six feet three with grey hair and thick spectacles which gave him the impression of being lost. His manner was vague and friendly.

He was shaking his tweed cap and loosening his damp burberry as he moved into the lounge.

"I wonder could I have a gin and orange with ice ?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly," the manageress said and called up a dim-lit corridor. "Are you there, Jimmy ?"

That was how he was remembered in most of the small town hotels, as Major Fagworth who insisted on having ice with his gin and orange, the big Englishman who travelled for some Frigidaire Company, a nice big man who sometimes talked after his third gin, but who mostly just sat there twisting the glass in his hands as if it were a rare object and staring very hard at it through his thick lenses.

He looked around the lounge slowly. There didn't seem to be anywhere for putting one's cap and coat. Presumably one just put them on an empty chair ; he did this and sat down. There was a lull in the conversation of two priests and three men who stood before the large fireplace. For a moment they watched him curiously over their half-whiskeys, and then continued talking. One man had a greyhound on leash. All three kept nodding and agreeing with a voluble priest. The other priest, whom they referred to as 'doctor' had a sallow face and dark eyes. He had a reserved, observant manner, and resembled someone the Major once knew—who? where? In India? In England?

He picked up a magazine and tried to remember who the sallow priest reminded him of. But of course! That chap Rigby! Yes the chap Beatrice had been engaged to—yes, and ring Beatrice to-night ; every Tuesday and Thursday ; this was Tuesday night. It was such a thundering bore but she became hysterical if he forgot. What had happened to-day? Again the old problem : what to tell her? He took out an envelope

and pencil and wrote :

- (1) Appalling weather.
- (2) Sold two Frigidaires.
- (3) Ran out of petrol near Cashel, had to take a lift into town and come back with petrol.

He bit the end of his pencil and stared very hard beyond the greyhound-holding man who imagining himself under scrutiny, swallowed a mouthful of whisky and said something irrelevant in a loud voice. The Major continued biting his pencil reflectively. Ah, of course. He wrote again :

- (4) Is new cooker installed yet and how is Brownie ?
- (5) Has Kerin done anything about the dampness in the lumber room ?
- (6) Is he allowing you to choose wallpaper for the dining room ?

He re-read his items with quiet satisfaction. Sometimes especially on Thursday nights he often had only three items, weather, how are you Darling, and how is Brownie ?

A boy arrived with his large gin and orange as he was putting away the envelope.

“Thank you, thank you . . . there is some ice ?”

“Yes, Major, we’re just getting it for you now.”

“Good . . . good.”

He sipped the gin slowly ; it was kind of dead without the ice. He glanced at his watch—7.45. Life, apart from driving the endless twisting roads and interviewing shopkeepers, had become a matter of watch-glancing ; time had no value, evenings were meaningless. At the week-ends it was a matter of cramming a multitude of things into a short time, during the week it was a matter of knowing what to do with time. It was just something on a watch—7.45. He would retire at eleven and between times . . . ? Well, there was his evening walk—cancelled to-night because of the rain, and then the last resort—the local cinema ; second rate films, the oppressive staleness. But it was better than nothing, better than trying to read in a public lounge or freezing to death in an impersonal bedroom.

The sense of loneliness came again (gin-sipping always made him lonely), an awareness of people in this small town, people sitting by fires, people talking, singing and making love, of the other commercial travellers in the main bar-room drinking and laughing. He was one of them but they couldn’t accept him ; there was always the slight tension—his clothes, his appearance, his accent—and whenever he had managed to break down this tension-barrier he had always been bored and annoyed. They would become over-intimate. They imitated his accent and talked pornographically and pointlessly. The whole beauty was in breaking the barrier : like the thrill of chasing an elusive woman, a romantic adventure till you catch up with her and

discover her commonplace sameness.

His gin was half finished and the promised ice had not yet come. He was beginning to get annoyed when the boy arrived with a large bowl of it. The Major thanked him warmly ; there was enough ice for a whole regiment of gin-drinkers. He smiled. This sort of thing happened everywhere in Ireland. One couldn't very well get annoyed at a ten minute delay when one half-suspected some extravagant gesture—a bowl of ice for one gin. He smiled again ; Beatrice would enjoy that.

The priests and the three men were consulting their watches: "Half an hour at least to get over to Bally . . ." he didn't catch the name ; one of the unpronounceable ones. They were all clearing their throats and nodding gravely. They moved out in a bunch. The pleasant, efficient-looking manageress was passing through. She stopped for a moment : "Are you alright, Major ?"

"Oh, yes . . . yes, thank you very much." He flicked a long hand after the retreating party—"a dog meeting or something to-night ?"

"Yes in Ballymacnaskerry."

"Oh . . . oh, I see. Far from here ?"

She paused thoughtfully : "Oh I should say . . . about five miles."

He knew a couple of Managers and Manageresses in small towns, amiable, talkative people. This woman was too efficient, too busy freezing more ice or something. He was still nodding : "Five miles," and added, "Don't think I'll bother tonight." She was moving away with a ready-made laugh : "No, it's not ideal is it ?"

He was alone now in the lounge. A cocker spaniel wandered in, nosed his shoe, looked up at him with pleading eyes and sat down. He fondled its ear ; it reminded him of Brownie and Beatrice. He would have to ring her soon, between 7.30 and 8.30. Voices sounded in the lobby, English voices. Somebody was saying : "Yes, Captain, yes, certainly Captain !"

A squat wine-faced man with a red moustache and a lean aloof-looking man came into the lounge. They were commenting on the weather. The wine-faced man smiled good-humouredly at Major Fagworth : "Good evening," he said, rubbing his hands and added "wretched weather."

"Appalling," the Major agreed with a friendly smile.

* * *

Mrs. William Fagworth said with some irritation. "Oh go and lie down, Brownie," and a dachshund with incredibly sad eyes crept away from her and lay down. She lit a cigarette and switched on the radio, waiting impatiently for it to heat up. Gay dance music throbbed incongruously in the drab Victorian drawingroom, and for the tenth time Mrs. Fagworth stared at

the curious, old telephone. What was Fags up to? Had he forgotten again. Words and warnings were lost on Fags. Every Monday morning the same easy smile : "I'll give you a ring on Tuesday and Thursday, darling," and every second week he forgot either on Tuesday or Thursday. Had he ever stayed alone in this big, empty, rented house for a week with nothing but a silly maid and a dog, with nothing to hope for but two 'phone calls and the odd letter.

She drew heavily on her cigarette and called coaxingly : "Brownie, Brownie!" Spontaneously the sad-eyed dachshund jumped on to her knee.

"Darling Brownie," she cried. "Brownie wouldn't forget to 'phone poor Beatrice if he was away travelling, would he?" She held up the two front paws. "Would Brownie forget?" Brownie licked her face and whimpered.

The half wall-papered room caught her eye. That dreadful Kerin man. He had consented to her choosing the wallpaper but this appalling business of taking a week to paper one room. And then those slates over the lumber room; he had promised to get a man out to do them on Monday—Oh, my God, why had she ever come to this place. It had seemed so nice in the advertisement :

"Magnificent view of Rossbeg hills, lakes on the estate, use of spacious outhouses, period furniture and every modern convenience." And all this for three pounds a week. It had seemed like an answer to her prayers. After all it couldn't be much worse than their rented apartment in Clontarf. Social life in Clontarf had been a series of weather comments with bank clerks and shop-keepers. The people in Clontarf, in Dublin generally, seemed to resent her in some way. And then when Fags came home at the week-ends he was simply too exhausted to do anything; just sat around with his collar loose. "Lakeview" couldn't possibly be as bad. She had imagined chickens, country walks, colourful people and no bank clerks.

But it was all so very disillusioning. Lakeview was shabby and you couldn't see the lake because of trees which darkened the whole place. The people were polite, distant and far from colourful. They agreed with everything you said, smiled and were altogether charming, but they postponed everything. Time didn't matter to them; to-morrow, next week, next year, it was all the same, you couldn't even get a nail hammered in. And then the way Fags had smiled and said, "We'll have great fun fixing it up, darling," and of course if the wireless was making noises, poor Fags usually fixed it so that it wouldn't even switch on.

She patted Brownie sadly on the head and changed to another programme. It was 9.30. There was no point in crying. Fags was Fags and he had forgotten again in his complacent way—

complacent, yes that was Fags. She stared at the curious, old telephone again. It was damn unfair all the same. All he had to do was to pick up the 'phone and say—"Give me Balincomer 81, please" and they could chat for five minutes. *Where* was Fags? *What* was he up to? It was damned unfair, it was . . . it was. Tears were fighting to her eyes. "Oh go and lie down, Brownie," she said again and with incredibly sad eyes Brownie crept away, but he knew he would be called back in a couple of minutes.

* * *

When the Major emerged from "The Regal" his head cleared suddenly and he thought: "Oh God, oh damn it no," and limped quickly through the rain to his hotel. How had he forgotten. Oh, but of course, the two Englishmen. Damn nice chaps too. They had joined him in a couple of whiskies and left for Cork at nine. My God, how had he forgotten Beatrice! Why had he rushed out to the fatuous picture?

"Balincomer 81," he said breathlessly to the operator.

"Get your one and sixpence ready, sir," she said. "I can put you through almost immediately."

"Righto, righto," the Major muttered, digging deeply into his pockets and then inserting the coins. Another pause ensued while he searched rather excitedly for his items envelope. He found it and stared hard at it through his thick lenses. The writing seemed blurred. He brought it closer. The 'phone clicked and he heard Beatrice at the other end:

"Hello, hello, is that you Fags, darling, is that you?"

"Yes . . . yes, dear, this is Fags speaking."

"Everything alright? I've been on for a couple of minutes?"

"Oh everything's alright, darling."

"I was worried when you didn't phone, Fags? Where are you?"

"Eh?" The Major searched about in his mind. Where was he? Good God, he didn't know!

"Hey, there, boy," he called into the lobby.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is this?"

"This is the Hotel Ecclesforth, sir—" suspiciously.

"No, no—I mean what's the name of this place—" impatiently.

"Name—of—this—place—sir?" — slowly, uncomprehendingly.

"Town—you fool, town?" shouted the Major.

"Oh this is Killybaden, sir—" nervously.

"Oh, oh, I see. Killybaden. Sorry," he said apologetically and added. "Thank you very much."

"Hello, darling."

"Yes, here Fags."

"I'm in a place called Killybaden, lovely little spot."

"You forgot, of course—" reprovingly.

"Yes, I'm sorry, dear—" meekly.

"Any news?" he asked quickly.

"Oh nothing much, except that the dining room's not done yet and the lumber room still leaks."

"Uh huh."

"How did you get on?"

He consulted his envelope:

"Weather was appalling," he said, "and I sold two."

"Did you, congrats, darling?"

"Had a dreadful time with the car too. Ran out of petrol at Cashel and . . ."

Warning pips began.

"It looks as if we're going to be cut off."

"You *will* ring me on Thursday, darling, won't you?"

"Of course, dear, of course."

"Cheerio, darling."

"So long, darling—keep smiling."

The Major put down the 'phone with a feeling of relief. Talking by telephone was dashed awkward, but the envelope delay had saved him—there were even some items left for Thursday.

As he emerged from the telephone booth, the two priests entered the lobby followed by the three smiling seculars. The greyhound-holding man no longer held a greyhound, but clutched a silver trophy. They all entered the lounge talking excitedly except the sallow-priest who smiled reservedly.

The Major looked at his watch; just 10.30. The public bar-room door opened, flinging out a sudden throb of voices and laughter. He wondered whether he should go into the lounge or bar-room and have another small gin, or simply go straight up to bed. Laughter pulsed in the lounge, and again the bar-room flung out loud voices. He looked out the glass door of the porch. Rain twisted and whipped sinously on the black road. He shrugged and blinked behind his thick lenses: there was nothing for it but bed.

* * *

Beatrice kept looking at the curious old 'phone, hating it. A minute ago it was alive, vibrant with Fag's deep easy voice; now it was dead, ugly, impersonal. It was so thrilling when the 'phone rang, so thrilling to know that Fags had remembered. But that delay while he searched for something and asked questions. Just like Fags. If she had even asked him his number she could have 'phoned again. Of course Fags would never dream of making a second 'phone call; those sort of ideas never occurred to him.

On her way up to bed she called: "Kate, Kate, hello, are

you there Kate?"

There was no reply; there seldom ever was. Kate liked pictures and dancing.

She called back to the lounge: "Brownie, Brownie, come here, pet."

Brownie came scampering and whimpering from the warm fire. For a moment she imagined a muffled voice coming up from the yard: "Shh! Shh! Brownie, sit down."

Brownie obeyed sadly.

She listened. The grandfather clock ticked solemnly on the stairs and then extraordinarily she could hear the beat of her own wristlet watch. The wind and rain outside seemed something apart. It was as if she were locked away forever, from everyone and everything in this great empty house, locked away even from the wind and rain in the utter silence of a ticking clock and wristlet watch—alone.

There is a glass and a half of rich full-cream Irish milk in every half pound of Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolate.

That's why everyone is saying . . .



FRY-CADBURY (IRELAND), EAST WALL, DUBLIN.

EDWARD McCARTHY

NOAH

WEST WEST CLOUDS, BLACK HUMPBACKED GIANTS, MASSED THEM-selves over the sea, and the sea under the clouds turned sullen and angry black. And one of the idle fishermen by the quay wall said :

—Look, it looks just like 'twas dawnin' over there.

He laughed, and his companions' faces laughed ; and one said :

—Ha, that's a good one : dawnin' in the middle of the day. An' in the west too.

But the first fisherman stopped laughing and said seriously :

—Yeh. But God help them boats that went out this mornin'.

And further up, in the town, where people walked like flies, where jealous and bored and smiling shopkeepers sold their goods over counters or chatted with customers, or stared without seeing at people who passed on the streets, a slight shadow fell, but no-one noticed or thought to look towards the west where the black clouds gathered.

And further still, about two miles east of the town, in the cottage on three acres of rushy land where she lived with her widower son and his son, Maura Coppinger swayed the upper half of her body before the empty grate. Because she was paralysed from the hips down, and because she was old, she spent the day in swaying her shrunken shoulders, and in praying on her rosary that had several beads missing.

—Mother o' God pray for us sinners now an'—come away from them plates Patrick, come away I tell yeh !—now, now an' at the hour of our death amen . . . Patrick, can't yeh find some-thing' useful to do with yerself. Yeh lazy little tramp.

The little boy stood beside the big roughwood dresser and stared at Maura and then eyed the floor and began to scratch between his thighs which under the dry caked yard mud were red from ire. He moved his mouth but said nothing, but a light entered his eyes when Noah's shadow came through the low door and the big figure of Noah appeared and shut out the light.

—Well, I'm ready.

—Noah . . . Maura did not move her head.

—Yeh.

—Take Patrick with yeh.

—For why ? 'S he bin doin' somethin' ?

—Yerra, take him. He's never saw the town.

—'S he bin doin' somethin'?

—He done nothin', but he's never saw the town. I think yeh should take him along with yeh, that's all.

Noah eyed his son. His big body shut out the light from the kitchen. Patrick twisted a loose dangling strip of his pants, watching their faces, afraid.

Noah said: —No. Yeh'll want him yehrself here. I don't want the little bugger anyhow. I'll be busy.

—Busy? Maura half turned. —Did yeh say busy, Noah? She made a noise with her tongue.

—Yeh'll be busy in the publichouses.

—He aint goin'.

—But . . .

—He aint goin'. Aint once enough to tell yeh?

Noah strode to the mantelpiece and took a match and lit his pipe.

Maura said quietly: —He's never saw the town . . .

—Sugar the town! Noah's face worked: he flung away the match. —Sugar him an' the town an' everythin'. He ain't goin', so shut your gob.

Maura tried to move, and her rosary fell on the hearth-stone.

—Patrick. Pick up me beads like a good little boy.

Patrick moved to obey, but Noah stooped, grabbed the rosary and flung it on her lap.

—D'yeh want anythin'? he said roughly.

She did not answer. She was sitting with her eyes closed: her lips moved:

—Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee blessed art thou among women . . .

—You, said Noah coming and standing over the boy: —if she want anythin' get it for her. D'yeh heed me?

The boy nodded. He turned and faced the naked rough-wood dresser.

Hesitant, Noah looked at their backs, scowling: then pocketing his pipe he turned and strode out of the cottage.

—I'll be back afore dark, he said from the doorway.

And sometimes the sun sent long thin rays of watery light down through the massed clouds and little pools of silver formed among the black of the sea but the clouds kept coming and they pressed in until the rays of light went out and the silver pools disappeared from the sullen waters. And one of the idle fishermen by the quay wall said:

—Look, it looks like 'twas night over there an' it's still day in here.

And another said forebodingly:

—Yeh. But in about another five minits . . .

And he put his right forefinger into his toothless mouth and held it up :

—Yeh. As sure as ye're standin' against that wall she'll be comin' in less'n five minits.

He spat over the wall and stared broodingly on the green phlegm floating on the water . . .

And when Patrick came shyly forward from the roughwood dresser old Maura did not move. He stood for a while in the centre of the concrete floor and looked at her bowed back and then he sidled up to her chair :

—Nanna . . .

Maura slowly turned : her face was yellow and old : her lips still moved :

. . . —blessed art thou among women an' blessed . . .

But she stared at the boy and beyond him and she did not see that his eyes were wet.

—Nanna . . .

Quietly she said, scarcely hearing :

—Yeh, Patrick . . .

And suddenly, seeing, she was immediately concerned :

—Patrick, Patrick, what's up with yeh ?

She pulled him gently around until he was before her, and then she put her hands on his thin shoulders and stared with anxiety into his eyes.

—What's up with yeh, Patrick ?

He sobbed, and a long snot appeared at his nose and came down over his upper lip.

—I wanta go to town with da, I wanta go to town with da.

—But Patrick yeh can't, can't yeh see ? Yeh just can't.

He cried and sniffled and the long white snot trembled on his lip.

—I wanta go to town with da.

—Yeh can't, Patrick, yeh can't, yeh can't. Anyhow he's after goin' now and yeh can't go with him.

—But I wanta, I wanta.

—Yeh can't, so shut up !

Maura pulled him closer, and reaching up caught the snot between her fingers and shook it into the fireplace.

—Now, she said coaxingly, —won't yeh sit down like a good boy an' we'll have a nice little chat, just the two of us. Now, she said when he sat beside the grate, —what'd yeh like to chat about ?

—Town.

—Alright. We'll talk about town. An' someday soon yer da'll take yeh to see the town, wait an' see. 'Tis a lovely town, all houses an' shops and streets on the edge o' the sea an' there's always seagulls flyin' over the houses squakin' an' screamin' an'

hundreds o' tourists comes from all over the world, America an' England an' an' from all ends o' the world they comes to see the bay where all the islands is, Horse island an' Sheep island an' . . .

—What's an island, nanna?

—Hah? An island? 'Tis, 'tis a bit o' land Patrick or a rock out in the sea.

—An' is there horses an' sheep an' cows on it?

—No, no.

—An' why's it Horse island so?

Old Maura smiled. —Now listen, Patrick: if ye're goin' to keep on askin' me questions yeh'll never hear about town. . .

The black clouds began to move, and as they moved eastward their shadow came before them over the water. And one of the fishermen said:

—Time to be gettin' home boys. 'Tis goin' to pelt for further orders.

And one of his companions said mournfully:

—Gawd help them boats: they'll get the ass lashed offa them.

And they went slowly up the cobbled quay and the shadow fell on the cobbles and on the long low timber buildings at the end of the town. And one said:

—Thanks be to Jaysus we aint goin' to be out in this.

A few big drops fell, and the fishermen hastened their pace and turned off up the sidestreets and lanes at the end of the quay. And the quay and the two piers, the iron and the timber, were deserted but for the seagulls that restlessly stood on them and on the half sunk hulk in the middle of the harbour.

The shadow fell upon the town, and faces looked up anxiously from the streets and eyed the west. And when the rain began to fall it came heavily at once and sent the people scuttling from the streets. They watched it from the windows of their houses and farmers scowled at it from shops where they had taken shelter. And one of the farmers said coarsely:

—How in hell we goin' a get home in this bloody weather?

And shopkeepers waved and said:

—Oh, don't worry: only a shower. It'll soon pass.

But Noah slowly shook his head and growled:

—'Tis rain for the day an' no shower.

And Mary the bar girl said: —'Tis too heavy to last.

But Noah shook his head again and muttered something and stared out at the rain which was beating fiercely down on the smooth tarred street. He watched it dancing on the tar and raising little muddy splashes, and he watched the volume of water increasing in the waterchannels.

—Like hell 'twill . . . 'tis rain for the day . . . rain all over

the country for the whole bloody night. . .

And in her cottage old Maura soothed Patrick who had been frightened by the sudden deluge and by the unexpected darkness.

—Now, Patrick child, don't worry. 'Tis nothin' to be afraid of. 'Tis only water comin' down outa heaven for the good of the land for to make things grow.

But even as she spoke her heart was sick, for she knew that it was not good for the land ; she knew that the wheat needed sunshine and that the rain would lodge the long half ripened corn ; and she trembled and whispered in Patrick's ear and told him not to be afraid because God sent the rain for the land.

—'Twill break the windah, nanna.

—Hush child : 'twill do no such thing.

But he pressed against her and hid his face against her dugs.

—'Twill break the windah, nanna. 'Twill knock down the house. 'Twill drownd us all.

She put her fingers over his lips :

—Sh . . . sh . . . 'twon't . . . 'twon't . . .

—'Twill so, nanna. Da won't have us, da won't find us when he gets back. We'll be drownded.

—O, yeh poor child. 'Tis nothin', 'tis nothin'. 'Tis good I tells yeh.

—No, no, no, 'tis bad. 'Tis bad, nanna.

She lifted his face and looked into his fearful eyes. She said :

—Patrick . . .

He avoided her eyes.

—Patrick !

—Yeh, nanna.

—Patrick, yeh mustn't be afraid. I'm very old an' I aint afraid.

—But I aint old, nanna.

—But yeh must try to be in the rain, child. Oid like me. Sure, listen Patrick, I'm as oid as, I feel as old as, as them mountains, Patrick . . . an' look, Patrick, with this—she held up the rosary—yeh needn't never be afraid. *She'll* save us all.

The boy locked at the rosary but he could not keep from staring at the window and at the rain that lashed it venomously.

—We'll all be drownded, nanna . . .

And in the publichouse Noah leaned drunkenly forward over the stout-smeared counter and flicked his fingers at the bar girl :

—Mary girl, I wants yeh a sec.

She smiled ; she came over, tying her apronstrings, smiling.

—Yes, Noah . . .

—I wanna see yeh, Mary.

—Well, yeh see me, Noah, don't yeh? I'm in front of yeh.

—Aw, aw . . . He waved his glass. —I means, I means — yeh knows damn well what I means . . .

—Now do I? she asked primly.

—Yeh does so, Mary. Yeh never refused me yet.

—Aha . . . but I'm gettin' older. I'm gettin' sense, she added.

—Well, will yeh, Mary? We'll go to the pictures first an' then we'll go for a nice walk . . .

—What, in this rain? She set to washing beer glasses signed with beer froth.

—Well anyhow we'll go to the pictures, Mary?

—Okay. She nodded. She said:

But won't you have to go home before nine o'clock?

He stood up, staring at a Guinness advertisement. —'Tis true, Mary. I always say so: Guinness is good for yeh.

She repeated: —But Noah, don't you have to go home?

—Hah? Home? He slugged stout from his glass. —Home be damned. I came to town to take yeh to the pictures an' I'm takin' yeh.

Proud to hear that she smiled. She said:

—You're a gas man, Noah: yeh don't give a damn.

—Hah? Damn? I don't give a sugar!

She sucked her lips in, pretending to be shocked:

—There's a lady present, Noah Coppering. Yeh should be ashamed of yerself, so yeh should.

But Noah laughed and tried to catch her over the counter, but she stepped nimbly back, laughing, and then they were both laughing and secretly looking forward to what was to come:

—Oh, laughing Noah, she said laughing, —I know what yeh're laughing at . . .

And behind Maura's cottage the river rose and burst its bank and flowed down and surrounded the cottage. And Maura was saying:

—The rain's for the good of the land, Patrick. The good God sees when we need it an' he opens up a big tank in heaven an' the angels comes with buckets and pours down rain on us an' on the land so 'twill give us good.

But in her heart she was sick because the rain had been falling for hours and because she knew the crop was ruined. And when she was not soothing the boy she was fingering the rosary and praying to God that He might help Noah to bear up when he discovered his loss.

—Glory be to the Father an' to the Son an'—God help us, Poor Noah, poor Noah . . . what'll he do now?

And Patrick screamed suddenly: —Look, nanna: it's in! it's

in! Oh, we'll all be drownded.

Old Maura, turning as much as she could, saw the water flowing quickly under the back door. And before she had time to think Patrick, white-faced and shaking, ran to the door and pulled it open; and the rush of water tore the door from his hand and knocked him off his feet.

—Close it! close it! Maura screamed, frantic, unable to move.

We'll be drownded, cried the boy. He tried to close the door but the water was coming too strong; it was up to his knees now and rising still.

—The front door! Out the front door! Maura tried to lift herself with her arms but fell back gasping: —Quick! Quick! Patrick.

The boy stood helpless.

—Quick! she shrieked.

He waded to the front door and stood helpless.

—Go on out.

He opened the door; the water was all round the house: the hoarse wind blew through the doors: the water steadily rose, rising around old Maura's useless legs. Helpless, Patrick watched, then madly he crossed the kitchen against her screams and pulled at the chair as the waters rose. Screaming, she clawed at his face with her yellow hands while he, weak-handed, pulled ineffectively at her chair and at her sleeves and skirt. She struck him and he fell back, and the water was up to his chest now and he turned and waded to the front door and waded out and up beyond the house and when he reached high ground he turned and saw the house half covered with water but he heard nothing only falling rain, falling through all the universe, from God's tank up in heaven.

BENEDICT KIELY

STEADY BOYS AND STEP TOGETHER

EXTRACT FROM A NOVEL TO BE CALLED "THERE WAS AN ANCIENT HOUSE."

(I)

FRAWLEY WAS THE FIRST OF THE FIRST YEAR NOVICES TO TAKE HIS hand from the plough. "Shot down," said Barragry, "over Alsace"; and, indeed, the blue depression that followed Frawley's departure was not unlike the atmosphere Barragry had once felt in the mess of an army aerodrome on a wet morning when two brother pilots had collided in mid-air above the field. The pilots still alive had sat silently eating, sharply conscious of two empty chairs, of rain on the square outside and on the hangars, of cooling metal fragments piled on the field.

One night Frawley was more than usually boisterous at the recreation that preceded the four last things. Next morning he was gone with no goodbyes said, no statement made by the magnor*. He had been swept away into silence and only one of his brothers had seen him go, not in a flaming sky-going chariot but in the battered monastery V8.

Short-taken early that morning Mackenna had slipped out to the lavatory. The holy gown, God's uniform, made a useful dressing gown. At the side window his custody of the eyes relaxed. He hadn't the strength of Bernard of Clairvaux who, eyes cast down, never knew how many windows there were in the chapel of his monastery. Through the side-window he saw Frawley and a lay-brother lifting travelling bags into the car. The Magnor stood with them and gently patted Frawley's shoulder and gently shook his hand. Boisterous, uncontrollable, unconventional Frawley would bear back with him to the world the memory of that gentleness. For the rest of his life he would be free to gallop up stairs three at a time and nobody would remind him of it at a quarter of charity. He could be as rough as he liked on the football field. He need never again feed water to stupid roach in a concrete aquarium. Beyond the blue gravel the still-dark woods steamed with rain. It was a depressing sight, a deathbed scene, a peep over a prison wall at eight o'clock in the morning of an execution, a reminder that one was mortal, liable to sin, subject to death. Mackenna's stomach was sick. He fingered the coarse cloth of his gown hanging on the back of the door, and prayed: Sacred Heart of Jesus grant me perseverance.

Afterwards the brothers kept a silence, perhaps charitable, per-

* Magnor = Magister Novitiarum (Master of Novices).

haps terrified, but certainly uncanny, about the passing of Frawley. His death to the religious life seemed to have touched even Petit, Foley and Begley with a sense of insecurity, to have forced home on them that perseverance did not depend on human strength unaided but on humble prayer, obedience to the rule, on the circumfluent, all-powerful grace of God. Many were called but few were chosen. But how did even Petit know he would be chosen? The prayers for perseverance redoubled. During free time the chapel was full of novices kneeling as rigidly as craven images. Observing the frisson that followed his one remark about the shooting down of Frawley, even Barragry was no longer cynical.

But hatted and Chesterfield-coated and on the cold January road towards preaching and consoling in the Donohill poorhouse Barragry spoke about Frawley to his companions, Donnelly and Mackenna. They followed a frosty cart track through the oak-wood called the clochar. In ancient Ireland, it seemed, a house of holy women, a clocher, had stood there. Ancient Ireland's holy Christian people, Brigid in Kildare, Colmcille in Derry, had loved the oak groves; ancient Ireland's pagan druids had carried out their rites under the branches of the spreading oaks. In single file they tramped along a forester's path, through somebody's farm-yard, through a breach in the estate wall, down a gravelled laneway, over a stile to the Donohill Road. Traffic had thawed parallel tracks in the thin ice. They walked in those tracks. From the decent Protestant church that topped the neighbouring hill a funeral bell tolled. Lunches of brown bread and butter, wrapped in old newspapers, and two green apples each lumped awkwardly in their pockets. Once in a while a novice would break the rule and read those newspaper fragments, establishing for a moment a forbidden contact with the world of cities, aeroplanes, wars. The poorhouse was seven miles away. From dark fir groves on the bog below the embanked highway ghosts of medieval pilgrims, mendicant friars, wandering preachers might, Mackenna thought, watch us pass.

Barragry said, "Frawley's in Dublin now." He didn't mean to unsettle Donnelly or Mackenna. He was thinking of Frawley's Dublin in relation to his own Dublin.

"Poor Frawley couldn't take it," Donnelly said. "Community life got him down. But he could always become a secular."

"Like Father Robert but not so gentle. Unless age would make him gentle, rub off the corners." Donnelly said: "It's a high vocation. In many ways it's a harder vocation than ours." Donnelly was a second-year novice and even though it went counter to his genial humility deliberately to edify, he had to try, now and again, to talk like that. This, too, was his extraordinary tone day and folded in his pocket, exhorting or shaming him to higher thoughts, was the short sermon the grey-coated paupers would hear from his lips. Overmuch dwelling on the Frawley tragedy was bad for novitiate morale.

Conscious of futility, Mackenna asked: "Why do people leave?"

Seriously questioning, Barragry said: "Why do people come? Do we know why we come? Do we know what we come to? Do we know what we leave behind?"

"Brother," said Donnelly, "we're supposed to have minds of our own. We can only hope and pray that God will guide them the right way."

"Two years ago," Barragry remembered, "I went on a retreat. I was worried about something." Something serious, he was about to say. "The director came into the chapel to give us our first talk. He looked at us for a while. Silently. Then he said: 'Why in the name of Jasus am I here?'"

On a high hump-backed railway bridge frosty wind cut water from their eyes. The wind shrieked in the taut telegraph wires. Visible for miles, north towards Dublin and south towards Cork and Waterford, the shining tracks bisected deep brown bog. When Mackenna's blues were bad enough to keep him awake at night he could hear from his restless bed passing trains whistle, a sound lonely as the cries of bog birds.

"You can guess," Barragry said, "we were all flabbergasted. Bad language from the altar. God's name taken in vain the way a corner-boy would take it. A few elderly respectable exercitants were jolted up in their seats as if his reverence had just gone crackers and kicked somebody in the stomach. But then he qualified the startling statement. He said: 'Words taken not from the gospel but overheard from one of you, dear exercitants, on your arrival last night in main hall.' Donnelly laughed. Barragry was incalculable.

"Then on he went to tell us all about the meaning of a retreat, about the desire to find God and oneself in silence."

"A cute idea," Mackenna said. At an old mill by a small stream they left the road and took to the frozen towing path. "But I often say that to myself now," Barragry said. "Why in the name of Jasus am I here?" The wind rasped in dry thorn hedges. Mackenna could find nothing to say. Somewhere deep down in his back a gnawing pain reminded him of an ailment that had troubled his schooldays, a mysterious pain coming and going—kidneys or lumbago or wearing too tightly a leather criss-crossed belt that had belonged to his father?—then vanishing, no doctor consulted, nobody told, a year ago and, he had thankfully thought, forever. Now like a hot knitting needle it stabbed him three times on the road to the poorhouse, then fled, a red imp scurrying away over the bog. Was Barragry also vulnerable, subject to blues? Was Barragry, the brave, the wise, the strong, was Barragry also afraid? Donnelly could have said *semper*. It was the one word a senior novice could use to cheek undesirable conversation, the first of three words that meant always thank God, and implied: curb the tongue, the frail instrument spoken of by James the lesser,

the spinner of idle words, every one of which would have to be accounted for ; curb the tongue, have faith, accept God's will, subject the will and judgment, be the stick in the blind man's hand. But Donnelly said nothing. He wasn't the *semper* sort and Barragry wasn't an easy man to reprove.

"The sense of security," Barragry half-soliloquised, "is the oddest thing. Every man desires it. Some Communists, I'm told, have it. I knew a New Zealand officer who had a lot to do with the Russians during the war. Said you couldn't shake them. Impervious to all argument."

"Chesterton," Mackenna said, "would call that the padded cell mentality. No man except a madman can be proof against reasonable argument." Nor proof against pain. The hot knitting needle was stabbing again, one, two, and then away, a red flash over the cold canal. Walking up a slight slope—for the duration of the hot needle stabs it seemed like Annapurna—he rested his hand on the great icy lever of a lock gate. Over the half-door of the lock-keeper's house he could see a red fire, a real home, plates on the dresser, no rigid bells dividing the day, no over-aired corridors, no discipline, no chain, no quarters of charity, but amiable life unfettered by rule. "Chesterton," Barragry said, "could be a confounded old ass." Barragry knew this was no way to talk before men so much younger than himself, mere boys, but he couldn't stop. He wanted to hurt. He wanted to shock. The canker was eating him: remorse about remorse. A black Chesterfield coat could never armour him against memory. He said: "I once gave a lecture to a community of nuns and found there what the New Zealander said he found among the Russians. Armour-plated against fact. Smiled at all argument. Were they in a padded cell?"

"You surely didn't talk facts to nuns?"

"That was their simple faith." Donnelly beamed. "Little children asleep in the Lord." He was the only one of the three unaffected by the day's bitter cold. He wished to heaven, though, Barragry would quit this talk. Why did the magnor with smiling malevolence and the wish to mortify him, send him out on the Donohill experiment with the novitiate's two litterateurs? Could he switch the chat to Palestrina or football or the examen of conscience? The *semper* word bubbled in his mouth like a tiny wet balloon but he couldn't burst it into reproving sound. But Barragry with delicate understanding helped poor Donnelly from the dilemma's horns. He spoke to the still canal, to the sodden fields that were there on a lower level than the water, to one square Roman house grey between gaunt trees. He said: "Semper, Brother Barragry, semper . . . You're a disgrace to the Catholic Church." Donnelly and Mackenna laughed. Barragry could always be depended on. A mile ahead roofs and a thin steeple stood up out of the level land. "Compulsory Latin at night recreation," Barragry said, "is a wonderful thing."

At ease again Donnelly was ready to argue: "Kills me. I'll never face theology. Just imagine debating in Latin."

"Irish is worse," Mackenna said. Sometimes on long walks novices for thirty minutes, never more, never less according to holy obedience, spoke compulsory Irish. Mackenna spoke Irish badly.

"The other night," Barragry said, "just before recreation I was with the magnor. Long talk on journalism, the apostolate of the Press. A fine fire on his holy hearth. I was in no hurry to go. Stretch the legs, says I, and have the talk out until the dear brothers have rippled through their stiff fifteen minutes of Latin. Siste perumper, quaeso, frater, or, stay a minute, I beseech you, brother."

"When I came first," Donnelly said. "I thought Siste Perumper was the name of some nun who wrote spiritual books, like Mother Saint Paul or Mother Mary Loyola."

"I wait for Brother Beadle's whistie from the Manresa Walk to tell that Latin's ended. In English, I can manage, with little gusto, to talk stars with Brother Curran. But to talk about the stellae is utterly beyond me. Whistle goes. Out goes Barragry, fresh as a daisy and full of eloquence only to find that that night English came first and Latin last. Very tiresome, I call it. Very tiresome."

For a long time Mackenna was to remember in moments of stress Barragry's whimsical intonation when he said: very tiresome. Donnelly said: "I bet the magnor knew what you were at."

"I suspect, dear brother, he did. Fabius Cunctator himself wouldn't have been shrewd enough for him. The ways of the saints are not our ways."

"Wise as the serpent, simple as the dove."

"With your usual aptness, Brother MacKenna." They walked by a huge half-ruined warehouse built where the branch canal ended in a square, now bargeless harbour at the edge of the dismal town. "You gave a top performance, Brother Barragry, yesterday at voice production. In the clochar. You took my mind and Mackenna's off Bell's Elocution. Even Petit smiled."

"One of my great moments. A whole smile from Petit. Why did I ever leave the music hall?" To say or think, "Why did I ever leave?" was to open the mind to serpents.

Mackenna mimicked Barragry's precise accent reading aloud a Bret Harte poem from Bell's Elocution: Didn't know Flynn, Flynn of Virgina, lookee hyar stranger, where hev you been? "Myself," Barragry said, "I prefer 'Steady Boys and Step Together.' The patriotic touch. Resurgent Ireland on the march." They stepped together along a muddy side street. From the doorways of mean, whitewashed houses people watched them, saluted them casually. It was an unhandsome town and their rule allowed them to see only the worst end of it.

Every morning between breakfast and beads, said silently walking in the open air or in the ambulacrum if it was raining,

novices were encouraged to practise vowel sounds and read aloud, on the twisted paths between the clochar's oak trees. Their voices must, in that way, and by reading during meals in the Refectory, be prepared for the pulpit. Barragry had an ironic knack of picking inappropriate books and reading them aloud with a strained Oxford accent.

Donnelly said: "Voice production helps me to let off steam. It's grand to shout."

"Left, right, left, right," Barragry said with B.B.C. smoothness, "steady boys and step together. Wasn't he a blessed Irish patriot who put that copy of *The Spirit of the Nation* into the ad usum library. It looks so funny cheek by jowl with Archbishop Goodier and Saint Francis de Sales." Mackenna whistled softly the patriotic tune as he had heard it played in processions and on sports-fields by spitting, puffing, fife-and-drum bandsmen. "Ours, I'm sure," Barragry said, "shouldn't whistle party tunes. Although it wouldn't seem to matter what you do in this town. Did you ever see so much mud?"

Gratefully they left the muddy street to walk, by a sluggish river, along a black, crunching, cindery path. The town's main street, shops, carts, cars, gossip, lay over a bridge to their right. But the town, like the newspapers around their brown bread and the externs met on the road, was the world and was no concern of theirs. Mackenna's left heel was skinned. There was gravel in his shoe. But he walked on, not like a friar keeping pebbles in his sandals to mortify the flesh, but because he feared if he bent down to mend matters the knitting needle would stab again as he tried to straighten up. The gates of the poorhouse were ahead.

(II)

"In all our sufferings," Donnelly said, "we should remember what Our Divine Lord suffered on the Cross for our sins. Not only will that memory help us the better to bear our own trials but we will gain great grace by realising how much Our Lord suffered for us and by joining our sufferings to His sufferings and the sufferings of the holy martyrs who also suffered and died. We should say," said Donnelly desperately, suffering himself, feeling like a martyr, "Thy Holy Will be done." To pad things out a bit he added: "On earth as it is in heaven." An old simple-minded man in Donnelly's congregation piously bowed the knee and crossed himself.

Standing on the stone floor a little to the rear of Donnelly (retro, brother, not post, as Petit would say) Barragry thought like a sub-editor: Too many sufferings in that one.

Donnelly knew he couldn't talk for toffee. Diligently he had cribbed from books of sermons in the ad usum, passing over Bossnet, Lacordaire and Bourdalane as just a little bit high for a poorhouse audience, finding most help in a shapeless badly-bound book produced by an Irish provincial press to enshrine the Sunday morn-

ing sermons of some country parish priest. The style wasn't so hot but it was good plain meat, thickly sliced from the haunch of the gospel. The great thing was, of course, to speak from the heart and let God do the rest. But why wouldn't God do something to make his tongue less like a pig's bladder, his hands less like the heavier weights of a wag-by-the-wall clock, his words less like distant boomings in a tunnel. The heart was all very well but if his grey, grim audience couldn't hear what he was saying, the grace of God would find itself working overtime. Wasn't there some story about Joseph of Cupertino, the saintly illiterate lay-brother, being compelled to holy obedience to preach a sermon, and skilfully dodging the column by saying an aspiration aloud or repeating several times the Holy Name of Jesus, or something like that? But then Joseph of Cupertino was an exceptionally rare bird, liable to levitate, when serving at table in the Refectory, and to soar upwards leaving hungry and aghast brothers grounded and foodless. H. G. Wells had a funny story about a man who levitated, not from sanctity but because he drank some rare Indian potion and, whoops, he hit the ceiling. You wouldn't expect H. G. Wells to know much about sanctity. Professor Alfred O'Rahilly of Cork, who had written the life of Father Willy Doyle, the Jesuit war chaplain, had called Wells a Cockney Voltaire.

Heavenly Father, he'd have to keep his mind on his tone—or on the old parish priest's sermon, written, perhaps, some peaceful morning to the accompaniment of birdsong in the trees around the rural presbytery. Distractions were the devil. Literally, I suppose, they're the work of the devil. Saint Ignatius advised one to diagnose and conquer them by, now and again, tracing a distraction back to its beginning, canda serpentis, the tail of the snake. But you couldn't very well indulge in snake chasing or charming while trying to preach to forty paupers—the up-patients in a poor-house—dressed in grey suits and peaked caps that had buttons on the tops, and with no money and no hopes.

"The winter is all around us now," Donnelly said. His right arm, more or less under its own steam, rose and fell like a stiff lever as, somewhat unnecessarily, he indicated the environing winter. The bare stone-floored shed into which the men had congregated stank of Jeyes Fluid. They had closed the double door on an open courtyard where the soil underfoot was as black as coal. But the door fitted badly and rattled in the wind and draughts came through like knives. There were no benches to sit on. Winter was around them and in their eyes and hearts, yet they were not on the defensive with any suspicion of patronage. They welcomed their visitors. They found even the infantile sermons, the pious leaflets and Rosary beads distributed—while nowhere on the level of a newspaper or a pipe of free tobacco—were still a break in the monotony of possessing nothing, having nowhere to go: "Shure the poor brothers, God help us. They're innocent young men. They'll be priests some day."

"And in the winter life can be very cheerless. Yet even in these January days the word of God teaches us to rejoice."

Barragry thought: Holy God. Mackenna wanted to titter.

"To-day, for instance, as we all know, is the second Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany—the Feast of the three wise men who came from the East to see the Divine Child, to show us how the ends of the earth must come together to praise the Lord." That flourish must have given the old parish priest the pure white glow that could only come from creative achievement. "And what words to-day does the priest read out at the Introit of the Mass. What words, dear men, but those words of joy from the sixty-fifth psalm of King David"—a bearded veteran in the congregation nodded gravely—"Let all the earth adore Thee and sing to Thee, O God. Let it sing a psalm of Thy Name, O Most High. And I, dear men, say with the psalmist . . ." Donnelly's face was puce. ". . . praise the Lord and rejoice even in the winter of our days."

"Dixit," Barragry whispered. For the look of the thing Mackenna crossed himself and said amen. "Praise the Lord," Donnelly whispered, "and pass the ammunition. Rejoice ye saints that that's over. Do you think they'll tear me limb from limb?"

An arthritic, bewhiskered cripple said loudly: "Yes, yes, not a word of a lie." The other men laughed, and talking and movement began in an easy friendly way.

The bearded veteran who had acknowledged King David shook Donnelly's hand: "I'm eighty years of age, sir, and not of your persuasion. But we both worship the same God." Then he added: "I was a bugler in the Connaught Rangers." He had round apple-red cheeks and bright eyes. He had stood, he said, on the guard of honour when the prince had visited the holy house, then my lord's mansion, and the red carpet was laid on the avenue under the high sailing cedars. He read his Bible every day and it had never failed him. Here's holiness, Donnelly thought, and felt seven times a fool. At the town's end, forever a pauper, was the veteran happy with his Bible, with his recollections of bugles blowing, red carpet laid for royalty.

(III)

In the coal-black courtyard Barragry talked with a small, square, quick-spoken man. The other paupers nick-named him the fiddler.

"You're from Dublin, brother."

"I am indeed."

"Oh, the true jackeen, I'd know the twang anywhere."

The Barragrys had never considered that they spoke with the true twang of the Dublin jackeen. "Yes indeed. You never lose the Dublin accent." But the fiddler, a staccato person, had already lost interest in accents. He was cross-eyed. Towards two different points of the compass he looked disconcertingly beyond

Barragry. He said: "Tell me brother do you know Tommy Behan, the weight lifter?"

"No. I can't say I do."

"From Cuffe Street. Decent people Tommy's people. Many's the pint I had with them."

What would Petit say under such circumstances: talk about Dom Anscar Vonier or recite his Latin grammar runes about *ante*, *apud*, *ad*, *adversus*, *circum*, *circa*, *citra*, *cis*?

"No. I have heard of Tommy Behan. But we never met." Cuffe Street wasn't exactly Barragry territory.

They went in silence seven paces over coal-black earth. Could this absurd spancelled talking across the unbridgeable gulf be regarded as the Christian act of visiting the sick, consoling the poor and the afflicted? He made another effort. He said: "Poor weather to-day."

"Aye, poor, poor. Brother, you wouldn't have a bob you could spare?"

"No. I'm very sorry. You see, we don't have any money."

"Oh, no harm done, brother. No harm done. But the nuns are a wee bit rough here if a man slips out to have a jar. They don't understand it, you see, brother. They don't understand the thirst."

"I suppose not. If I had it you'd be welcome to it. But as it is" His face was as brick red as his hair.

"I know brother. I wouldn't doubt you. God, I'd love a pint. Excuse the language, brother."

Holy poverty would mean that all through life things like this would go on happening. Poor people, genuinely poor or just touchers, would cringe up to you on the streets of Dublin and ask for alms when you hadn't a tosser in your pocket. The clerical coat and collar were sticking-out targets for touchers. Fools of laymen watching your flustered humiliation, while they jingled cash in their own pockets, would neatly judge you; the priests, it was easily seen, had no time for the poor. That was all part of the practice of the third degree of humility—to be esteemed a fool for Christ's sake—but in its own way it was as grim as the third degree practised by the American, and other, police. "If I had it you know you could have it."

"I know, brother. Shure, we're all poor. Tell me" and the eyes again angled around Barragry, ". . . do you know Tommy Behan the weight-lifter?"

(IV)

One of the holy nuns, in stiff, white bonnet and blue, voluminous habit, had taken the mild Mackenna in tow. The clerical hat in his hand felt as big and heavy as a pot of potatoes boiled for pigs. He walked with her up steps and along a metallically echoing stone corridor into a whitewashed ward where eight incurable men lay in eight iron beds. Then she left him suddenly and twittered, yes brother, no brother, away, leaving him islanded,

isolated, marooned, solitary, awkward and, hat in hand, alone with sixteen half-interested half-hostile eyes smouldering around him. She returned as suddenly, carrying on a white, enamelled, blue-rimmed tray surgical things that jingled even under a muting chequered cloth.

“Can I help you, sister?”

“Yes, brother. Just lift up the bedclothes.”

“This way, sister.”

“No, higher still, brother. Clear off the bed-cage. The abscess is on the thigh.”

He saw bandages and a vast limb. “Is that right, sister?” His stomach somersaulted. “Yes, brother. Now, brother, hold the tray.” She was a perky white-and-blue bird. He held the tray and he saw dropsy, the huge swollen limb, the oozing wound; and he heard the groans or snorts from the whale of a man, mountainous on the bed. You read about dropsy in the new testament but you didn’t imagine it in the least like this. New testament dropsy was tantamount to a running nose. Then, hobbling to his relief came the be-whiskered, arthritic cripple who had capped Donnelly’s tone with that odd grammar of assent. “Yes, yes, not a word of a lie.” He said, “Sister, brother, I’ll have the tray. Yes, yes brother, not a word of a lie.” His name was Pat Flynn and among his fellows his nickname was, of all things, Yes Yes Flynn. When the dropsical man’s wound was dressed and the blue-and-white Sister had twittered away, he sat between Mackenna and a bed-ridden patient and told funny, but decent, tall stories. After each story he slapped a right hip that stood out like a buttress and said yes, yes, not a word of a lie, and, as sure as my name is Pat Flynn. He had power in the place. The nuns liked him. He never lacked tobacco. He seemed happy. He had probably no doubts about perseverance in his vocation. Could the knitting needle in the back be an arthritic twinge?

(V.)

Donnelly sat, helpless and wordless, by the bedside of a man who had a weak heart and a wife in a lunatic asylum. Let the earth adore Thee and sing to Thee, O God. “She was the best woman, brother, a man was ever married on. The constant care she gave to the house and the farm. Cooking she was and cleaning night and day. And, in the harvest, brother, or at the turf she’d do the work of two men. The children went away across the water and they’re doing well. I never told them I was here.” A thin, quivering hand pleated the bedclothes. A long grey louse crawled slowly over hills and down hollows on the coverlet. Donnelly watched it as a glistening jungle man, crouching and gripping the shaft of his spear, might watch a prowling tiger. “She prayed night, noon and early morning and you know, brother, it was a queer thing but in the end the

praying drove her astray. We lived three miles from the chapel and, go right, go wrong, work or no work, she took to going there twice a day on her bicycle."

Down some quiet country road, Donnelly saw, dust spirling under the tyres, dust grey and heavy on June roadside grass, drooping June leaves, to pray in a quiet empty chapel perhaps in Father Roberts' parish, sparrows twittering outside pointed windows, to pray like novices in the blues, hands clasped so as to hurt each other, lips moving, head nodding slowly from side to side. To pray for what: perseverance in sanity, riches, good crops, healthy cattle, laying hens, the children over the water, the husband at home? To pray and pray and pray until something snapped. "We found her wandering in the fields one day singing hymns and laughing to herself. I wondered how God could thole it and she so good." The louse, striking a grey patch of quilt and acquiring camouflage, had disappeared. Mackenna would be capable of quoting about the swan leaping into the desolate heavens, about the wandering hawk soaring off into blue air, about the poet rising and twitching his mantle blue and setting off tomorrow to fresh fields and pastures new. Did the louse know he was only a poorhouse louse, a pauper louse? "When the weakness isn't too bad I'm driven over in a car to see her. The nuns are very good about that. I never tell her I'm here though, brother. You see everything failed when she left me. The cattle and the crops and everything. It's hard to fathom it all brother. Sometimes she knows me and sometimes she doesn't and they say she prays there all the time with long rosary beads swinging rattling from her like a nun." The novitiate harmonium, the uncle, the bishop were as far away as Mars. "Shure maybe God that she prays so much to will give us all release before the children find out and they doing well beyond in Philadelphia."

(VI.)

Barragry gave three holy pictures to a' bed-ridden ancient with long white whiskers, apple-red cheeks, lively cunning eyes. "Twenty years in the States, brother, piling up the dollars and now I haven't a ha'penny to call my own. Is brother Matthews, the fairheaded fellow, with you to-day?"

"No. Matthews isn't here today." In the kitchen in the holy house Matthews was helping the lay brothers. He would, as it happened, never again see old white-whiskers who loved Matthews' cheery, cocky, Dublin chat, his capacity for inventing tall tales about the racehorses his father had in Kildare Stables. Matthews' father was, in fact, a secondary school teacher, but tall tales never worried Matthews if they went coupled with laughter. "How's that bay two year old behaying for Matthews' old man?"

Barragry lied: "Won a race Saturday last." A horse that lived only in Matthews' words was, for the charitable sake of entertaining an old incurable invalid, suddenly real and thundering home to a photo finish. The whole novitiate knew of Matthews' imaginary horses. The dollars piled up in the States had been squandered in Ireland by rapacious relatives. "Then, one day, brother, out picking blackberries I reached across a dry dyke to grab a bramble and in I went on my seat. Bust up my back. What's that written on the leaflet brother ? "

"It's French. It just says Sacred Heart of Jesus."

"Sacred Heart of Jesus. My, My ! And French." It was hard to be sure that the old man wasn't secretly laughing at the visiting brothers, but genuinely enjoying and understanding Matthews the inventor of horses. "And what's the picture, brother, above the French words."

It was a circular picture of Christ on the Cross, showing only the head, bowed and thorn-crowned, the bleeding face, racked arms, stabbed side.

"It's Our Lord on the Cross," Barragry said.

"Sure. Well fancy that. My old spectacles aren't so good." From under his pillow he fished a pair of steel-rimmed, oval-shaped spectacles, one lens missing. "Sure I see. I see something like a man expanding his chest. Like Max Schmeling or Jack Dempsey, himself. I saw Dempsey, brother, in Madison Square. There was a fighter." Bending low over the leaflet white whiskers choked with laughter.

(VII.)

"The old heathen," Barragry said. "The old rip. He made me feel like a pious girl."

Will that embarrassment at the fact that I'm now supposed to be good, follow me forever ? How crippled I felt when I realised that I couldn't talk to that old man as I would have talked to him twelve months ago, as I would have talked to him if she had been with me: bawdy stories, perhaps, to set him laughing, money to keep him in tobacco. French leaflets my sainted backside. In his time in the States that old fellow has seen more than French leaflets. Nice thoughts for a neophyte. What in the name of Jasus am I doing here? This experiment, this relic of medieval mendicancy, this memory of saints who toiled in lazars houses, is meant as a test for the young and innocent, to show them suffering, to show them what the world can do to men. That old man saw me also as one of the innocent, made me feel a dirty hypocrite and I couldn't talk naturally to him, couldn't even, like Matthews, invent an amusing lie. To his holy brothers Barragry said: "He was laughing at me all the time." They walked away from the poor-house on the black, cindery path by the black sluggish river.

“He knows Matthews is a chancer.”

“He takes the cowboy stories about the Kildare stables exactly in the spirit in which Matthews tells them.”

“Pleasant fairy tales.”

“To please an old pauper. It’s a queer background for fairytales.”

“Gruesome.”

“It’d make you think,” Donnelly said.

“If anything could.”

Mizzling rain, swept this way and that by weak puffs of wind, fell on the muddy town. The back of the frost was broken. “Poor old Shaky Richards. Seventeen years there in bed clutching a medal of the Little Flower.”

“And shivering and shuddering all the time.”

“And the old fellow in the corner with the high nightcap on his head.”

“Groaning to himself about the graveyard.”

“Under the cap there’s a growth as big as his head again.”

“Oh come off it. You’re worse than Matthews.”

“Honest. The cap fell off one day and I saw it. I’ll never forget it.”

“Semper deo gratias. I want to be able to eat my lunch.”

“I’m so hungry, I could eat a corpse.”

“Everyone to his own taste.”

“As the woman said when she kissed the cow.”

“Ours,” Barragry intoned, “should not discuss amorous matters.” Laughing, because they were young and the house of incurable disease, poverty and death could now be forgotten, they turned their backs on the muddy town, their faces to the towing path raised high above low fields and dim stretches of bog, luminous in places with silver-barked birch trees or flat pools reflecting steel-grey sky. They ate their lunch, brown bread and small sour apples in the shelter of a lock wall. Water thundered down from one great wooden gate. Rain blew in wreaths and veils over the bog.

“A drop of hot tea now . . .”

“Semper, brother, semper.”

“We must learn austerity.”

“Haven’t had a nettle roll since before Christmas.”

“Nettles will be better in the Spring.”

“Poor old brother ass. In the world how he used to love tea with his brown bread. Sugar in it as well. And sweet cakes.”

“Father Willy Doyle loved sweet cakes.”

“He used to cut himself with a knife too, cut Our Lord’s initials on his chest.”

“And he a Jesuit.”

There was a munching silence. Then Barragry said: "Each goodly thing is hardest to begin."

"What's that?"

"Spenser, the poet, writing about Zeal. Zeal was a franklin fair and free in the house of Holinesse. Spenser spelled it Z-E-L-E."

"Wonderful, dear brother. Could we wash this brown sawdust down with canal water?"

"But after the hard beginning when you enter the house of Holinesse you see a spacious court, spelled s-p-a-t-i-o-u-s."

"Main Hall. Polishing novices. Squeegees."

"No. The leper colony."

"No. The Refectory."

"And Zele there to entertain you with comely courteous glee."

"That would be the scholar, Petit."

His arm out, as if gesturing a blessing over tumbling canal water, Barragry quoted: "His name was Zele, that him right well became: for in his speaches and behaveour hee, did labour lively to express the same, and gladly did them guide, till to the Hall they came."

Donnelly wiped his fingers on wet grass. Mackenna tossed the newspaper in which his lunch had been wrapped into the churning, spuming lock. "And gladly did them guide," Donnelly said and Mackenna said, "Lead on Zele." They puiled up black coat collars against the strengthening rain. "Pilgrims are we," Barragry said. "Steady boys and step together."

THE LOVERS

GOOD, I THOUGHT, AS I SAW THE TRAIN WAS STILL THERE, SO I MADE it after all. Howth is not far from the City but this was the last train. I saw I still had a few minutes to spare too, which was just as well. During the week you do not usually get many trippers out here, even on a lovely late May evening like this, but you never can tell, and it's an advantage to have time to select your carriage for the homeward journey. It was a Diesel car and the third class coach was divided into three compartments, two large ones divided by a smaller one, but all connected by sliding doors. Already, from the rear compartment, came the sound of convivial singing. That ruled one out. The second of the large compartments seemed to be badly lighted, and as I had a book with me against the journey, as they say in the Gaelic, my mind was made up for me. As I took my seat in the middle compartment, I noticed casually it held only a middle aged couple. Good, I thought. One does not like to butt in on young lovers.

Soon we were off. There was still a little light left which threw into relief many of the local landmarks. I am very fond of Howth. The first time I saw it was when I was taken there with other schoolboys to see Aideen's Grave. Ferguson's poem had been on the curriculum for that year's Intermediate, and no doubt it was felt that such a visit would help to increase our interest in **our work**. It apparently did so with me, for ever since when I find myself there, and, alas, it is seldom nowadays, I find the poet's evocative lines coming back to me. The cries of the gulls so expressively rendered as "the clanking seabird's song" always to me seem to contain something of the wild grief of Aideen for her beloved Oscar.

It was some time before I realised that apart from the noise of the train no sound broke the stillness of our compartment. A quick glance told me that the woman was not married, only an engagement ring showed on the vital finger. With something of a shock I wrenched my thoughts from the heroic lovers of an earlier age to the more prosaic contemporary pair. Another of those dreadful long-drawn-out engagements of which Dublin seems to have more than its share. They appeared not to be on speaking terms. Although sharing the same seat, they sat rigidly upright and as far apart as possible. Here goes my book, I thought, for while other people's quarrels, especially in public, are rather embarrassing, nevertheless I am, like all of us, only too curious a student of the human comedy. Just the same, I pretended to

read my book, but with only half an eye. I was really much more interested in the prospect of some flesh and blood drama.

I began to study my fellow-passengers more closely. The girl, if she could still be so described, was I should say about forty-five. She had a rather faded look. She might have been pretty in a Dresden shepherdess way about twenty five years previously. Now she was definitely faded. She was well turned out in a neat black costume. She wore a small black hat. Her hair, which might once have been golden, but was now showing streaks of grey, was what, I believe, is called frizzy. She wore black court shoes. Her legs were good. Possibly a waitress, I thought. Why is it, I began to wonder, that so many Dublin waitresses remain unmarried, and in so many cases courting for years without ever getting to the matrimonial stage? Mothers to keep? They can't all have mothers to keep. The fact remains, in any case, that they do seem to miss the matrimonial bus in large numbers. Walk into any Dublin tea-shop and look around. You'll find that most of the waitresses are no longer young, and yet if you should happen to be around when they leave the premises later, you would be surprised to see how many of them are met by hard-faced, thin-lipped men, smoking interminable cigarettes, and reading their evening papers at the kerbside.

Of such a kind was her companion. There are many like him in Dublin. To those of us who know our city he is easily placed. A stranger might say he was thirty five, slightly worn round the edges, but we know better. We know he is fifty years old if a day, and has been courting that poor girl for perhaps twenty-five of them. He is thin, of sallow complexion, clean shaven. He has a hard mouth. You will find many like him at Baldoyle or Harold's Cross or shouting vituperations at referees in Dalymount Park. He has an extraordinary capacity for pints of porter, but is rarely drunk.

I began to think the journey was to be passed by them in silence, but women are too clever for that. He had to be made to suffer a bit for his sins.

"Ye haven't got much to say for yourself," she said. The first shot had been fired. She did not intend to mind me. I suppose she thought I was absorbed in my book.

He shifted uneasily. "What is there to talk about?" he said.

"Ye had plenty to say to that slut of a barmaid when ye got me back turned."

"Now lay off about that one. Shure a fellow can't even look at a girl, but you get in a bake."

His defence was not impressive. There seemed to be a guilt complex somewhere.

"Ye didn't have to lean over the counter and look into her

eyes, the way you were when I came back and caught ye," she continued.

He didn't answer but took out his cigarettes. What would we do without our cigarettes on such occasions? There was only one in the packet, which he lit, throwing the empty packet away. Had he but realised it, he had let slip a golden opportunity for appeasement, and in doing so, had succeeded in exacerbating an already difficult situation.

"Ye wouldn't ask *me* to have a cigarette," she said truculently.

"There was only the one in it," he explained, with bland masculine selfishness.

"It was all right for you to smoke mine all the evening," she complained, "and handin' them out to that barmaid too. The bloody cheek. Me mother was right. I remember the first night I brought ye home me mother said: 'Listen to me, Angela Doyle,' she said, 'that fellow's no good. Leave him where you found him.' That's what she said, but I wouldn't listen to her and now look at me."

"For Gawd's sake," he said, "leave Dracula out of it for once."

This was the last straw. Dublin girls' mothers are sacred. A slighting reference to your prospective mother-in-law is the unforgiveable sin.

"Ye dirty bousy," she said. "How dare you speak like that about my mother!"

"Ah, go to hell," he almost shouted, and with that stood up. He dashed his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, and quenched it with a savage twist of his shoe. For some time from the rear compartment the volume of the convivial singing had been increasing. "Nellie Dean" they were now rendering and in fine style too. They were harmonising it well. It was in that direction he retreated.

Now that he was gone, her vulnerability was more apparent. It's all very well to say attack is the best form of defence, but when a girl has been courted for twenty five years, and seen the last of her girlish bloom, the possibility of the fading also of her last chance is not to be lightly contemplated. I could see she was crying quietly, and I thought of trying to pour oil on troubled waters. But I thought twice. "Are you mad?" I asked myself. "Do you want to get your face scratched, and then maybe get clocked as well by your man. This is a private row. It has probably happened often before, and will surely happen often again." She recovered quickly, however, and proceeded to mend her face.

At Clontarf our friend returned. No words passed between them. After giving a furtive glance in my direction, to make sure first I was not looking, he dived quickly and recovered the

half-smoked cigarette. When I looked up he was puffing away contentedly.

Just as the train pulled into Amiens Street he made a desperate effort to find out where he stood.

"Am I to call round on Friday or not?" he asked. Friday apparently was the night devoted to whatever "love" they still had heart for.

"You can do as you please about that," she replied, and then as a parting shot, "but I may not be there."

When we alighted from the train she set off quickly, with her chin in the air. He followed slowly and somewhat sheepishly. Down the slope into Store Street she maintained the distance between them, some fifty yards perhaps. My way lay towards O'Connell Bridge. They had turned in the other direction. When last I saw them, he seemed to be gaining ever so slightly.



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THE REVERSED METAMORPHOSIS

THE WORLD OF SAMUEL BECKETT

“ . . . j'ai renoncé à vouloir jouer et fait pour toujours miens l'iniforme et l'inarticulé, les hypothèses incurieuses, l'obscurité, la longue marche les bras en avant, la cachette . . . ”

—Samuel Beckett.

Restituye a tu mudo horror divino,
amiga Soledad, el pie sagrado,
que captiva lisonja es del poblado
en hierros breves pájaro ladino.

—Luis de Góngora.

Do not come down the ladder, they have taken it away.

—Anon.

1

THERE ONCE LIVED IN FLORENCE A MAKER OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS who was noted both for his wit and for the fact that he was the laziest man in the world. Each morning he came into his shop and sat down and did not rise again until it was time to eat and go to bed.

A friend of his, Dante Alighieri, continually upbraided him with his torpitude but met only in reply with a quotation from Aristotle—"Sedendo et quiescendo anima efficitur sapiens". To which Dante (who was not renowned for his wit) could only counter, "Certainly, if by sitting one becomes wise, no-one was ever wiser than you."

Dante was to meet his friend later. Ascending from the pit of Hell, at dawn on Easter Sunday, A.D. 1300, guided by the shade of the poet Virgil, he prepares to make the ascent of the mountain of Purgatory. Reaching the foothills of the mountain—already in the Ante-Purgatory, where souls, for one reason and another, have to wait before they can undergo purgation, he sees a number of listless figures behind a rock.

Ed un di lor che mi sembrava lasso
sedeva ed abbracciava le ginocchia
tenendo il viso giù tra esse basso.

It is his instrument-maker friend, whose lassitude in life was so great that he put off repentance for his sins until the very last moment. For this he is condemned to wait in the Ante-Purgatory for a length of time equal to his life on earth.

His name, by the way, was Belacqua.¹

¹. Or Bilacqua or Bevilacqua (— Drinkwater)
Purgatorio IV. 106-135

Belacqua makes another, more extended, appearance in literature some six hundred and thirty years later—as the hero (if that is the right word) of *More Pricks Than Kicks* by Mr. Samuel Beckett.¹ The curious adventures of Mr. Beckett's Belacqua would hardly be of remarkable interest to-day were it not that the author has since become one of the few Irish authors to make an impression outside the Anglo-Saxon world. *More Pricks Than Kicks* is an amusing volume—clever, adept and, stylistically, neat. But it is not much more than that. Mr. Beckett, indeed, has left it behind, as he has left so much behind. Only Belacqua—the lazy and the witty—is still with us.

2

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. He lectured for a time in Trinity College, Dublin, but later went to live in France, where he is now a lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. His works in English include a brief monograph on Proust (1931), dogmatic and, at times, bumptious but not without value, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), *Whoroscope* (1930), *Echo's Bones* (n.d.) and *Murphy* (1938). The last of these books, which is also quite the most important, appeared in a French version (presumably by Mr. Beckett himself) in 1947. *Watt*, another novel in English, written in 1945, has just recently (August, 1953) been published by The Olympia Press, Paris.

Mr. Beckett has written three novels in French—they appear to form a trilogy—*Molloy* (1951), *Malone Meurt* (1951) and *L'Innommable* (1953). A two-act play *En attendant Godot* was first produced at the Théâtre Babylone, Paris, on the 5th January, 1953, and has enjoyed a remarkably long run. Another play (*Eleuthéria*) is announced but has not yet, apparently, been published or produced.

3

Of these works, the later—and, in particular the French—works are probably the most important. Mr. Beckett, who started off as a bright, a little over-clever, kind of full-length or Cinema-scope Myles na gCopaleen, has over the years purged himself of this dross—the partially purged purged by the partially purged.²

The first phase of Mr. Beckett indeed resembles much the first zone of Murphy's mind—the “radiant abstract of the dog's life, where the whole physical fiasco became a howling success.”

Belacqua and his loves (the Alba, heroine of that remarkably funny story “A Wet Night”, Ruby Tough, Thelma bbogs and the Smeraldina) are hilarious enough, but hardly represent what Mr.

¹ The full name of the hero of *More Pricks Than Kicks* is Belacqua Shuah. Shuah (Genesis XXV. 2) was the son of Abraham and Keturah. His tribe is generally held to be that which produced Bildad the Shuhite, one of Job's comforters, of whom we shall hear more later.

² cf. Samuel Beckett. “Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce” in ‘Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress’ (London 1936).

Beckett is really getting at (if he is really getting at anything at all).

Murphy, and, perhaps *Watt*, the trilogy *Molloy*—*Malone-Meurt*—*L'Innommable* and the play *En attendant Godot*, probably represent the Beckett *Weltanschauung* so far as it is possible to do so, and as far as it has developed (if, again, "developed" is the right word).

Belacqua is still the dominant figure. Indolence, or at least quietism, is the main characteristic of Mr. Beckett's heroes. Murphy, for instance, finds his personal truth only when he adopts the immobile position—naked in a rocking chair, tied down at all essential points by scarves. He finds his one true love, the prostitute Celia, by lying in an inert, pre-foetal attitude on a grass verge in London. It is only when Celia with the eternal feminine urge to recreate man in the female image, conducts her campaign to "make a man" of Murphy, that he goes so far as to establish relations with the outside world by taking over Ticklepenny's job in the lunatic asylum. There he meets his true fellows, those who have already established for themselves the division between their coherent inner reality and the make-believe of the outside world. Mr. Endon, the quiet schizophrenic who disrupts the world of Dr. Killiecrankie and his assistants, Bim, Bom and Bum, at the same time effecting Murphy's release not only from the asylum but from this world, is the perfection of this lunatic sanity. He is completely capsuled and completely insulated, and the words which force themselves into Murphy's mind as he takes his last long look into Mr. Endon's eyes are significant:

"La dernière vue que Monsieur Murphy obtint de Monsieur Endon fut Monsieur Murphy inaperçu par Monsieur Endon. Ce fut également la dernière vue que Murphy obtint de Murphy."¹

Mr. Beckett's world is one of isolation—"each in his narrow cell forever laid". Count Ugolino, locked in his horrible tower, is not more isolated than Molloy, Malone and the rest. There can be no human contacts across this half-lit Ante-Purgatory in which Mr. Beckett's cripples move, slowly or not at all.

If one wanted to find the polar opposite of Mr. Beckett, the obvious choice would be Mr. E. M. Forster. "Always connect" is Mr. Forster's slogan. "Always disconnect" seems to be Mr. Beckett's. "For the artist who does not deal in surfaces" he has said "the rejection of friendship is not only reasonable but a necessity . . . The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude". (*Proust* pp. 46.7).

"A way a lone, a lost, a loved a long the" The dying fall of *Finnegans Wake* seems appropriate. The resolute wastes to the north of Ballyba, the unreal forest, where Molloy collapses

¹ cf. Arnold Geulinex: "Esse me in hoc mundo=me spectare hunc mundum" (*Ethica*: Tract. I Sect. II § 2 Nr. 14).

Of Geulinex, much later.

inert and helpless and where the secret agent Moran sent by the unknown and unknowable Youdi to find Molloy is bereft, like his quarry, of his bicycle and his sense of purpose (or, perhaps, his will) is a lone and forbidding country where the ordinary comforting and comfortable activities of men are metamorphosed into a chilly, disgusting and inhuman pantomime. "Love, the beloved Republic", Mr. Forster's beacon in the murkiness of human life, is replaced by the grotesque athletics of Molloy and Edith or of MacMann and Moll or by the lower bestialities that flit through the mind of the Unnameable. This, indeed, is "the desert of loneliness and recrimination that men call love".¹

Human relations form no part of Mr. Beckett's universe. Neary, Miss Counihan, Wylie—even the Beckettesque Cooper who cannot sit down or take his bowler hat off—are by the author's own confession, puppets. The only real characters are Murphy, Molloy, Moran, Malone (the M.M.M.M. of *Murphy*, no doubt) and the partially purged Unnameable who has soared beyond the dubious world:—

"Ces Murphy, Molloy et autres Malone, je n'en suis pas dupe. Ils m'ont fait perdre mon temps, rater ma peine, en me permettant de parler d'eux quand il fallait parler seulement de moi, afin de pouvoir me taire."

The trouble is that this relaxed position leads not to the silence in which the ultimate truth might perhaps be found but to an almost unprecedented garrulity. The Murphys, Malones, Molloys and the Unnameable himself talk their heads off—and indeed it seems part of their condemnation that they should talk until the cows come home—and the cows so rarely do!

4.

This wilful withdrawal, like that of the character in Yeats' *The Player Queen* who took to his bed at a reasonably early age and had thenceforward no word for priest, parson or doctor but "Life is a vale of tears", has its point but, if Mr. Beckett were up to this apostleship of garrulous quietism only, his work would not be as "aggravating" (the Irish use of the word is intended) as it is.

For Mr. Beckett's heroes are not merely indolent, lying on their beds in the half light. Malone wakes to find himself in an alien bed; his one contact with the life outside is his prehensile stick which draws to him his plates of food, such belongings as he has left, and his alternate chamber-pots. (There is a pre-figuring of this situation in *Murphy* where Celia's next-floor neighbour, a recluse, who is never seen and whose food is delivered in the same anonymous fashion as Malone's, commits suicide—by accident, as the landlady subsequently proves). These Beckett heroes have made just one positive act of will—the first and the last volitional activity they will indulge in.

¹ Samuel Beckett *Proust* p. 38.

This act of will is the abdication of will. Will in Mr. Beckett's world is a criminal activity. He compliments Proust for being "almost exempt from the impurity of will". "Will being utilitarian, a servant of intelligence and habit, is not a condition of the artistic experience". Mr. Beckett says also "When the subject is exempt from will the object is exempt from causality."

5.

Causality and the link between the body and soul are topics that evidently have much troubled Mr. Beckett. The gap between the "I" and the "other", the blind jump across the chasm which separates the "ego" and the "id", the question of how causality can be proved to exist between the crouched, ingrown individuality and what happens outside is an old and familiar crux. It is as interesting and as futile as its parallel mathematical problem of squaring the circle. But there is a type of mind which is sucked into this type of metaphysical futility.

The curious duality of Mr. Beckett's will-less characters and their obscure relations with one another—Watt and the inexplicable Mr. Knott, whom he serves. Molloy and the detective Moran, Malone and MacMann whose strange dream-like existence seems to duplicate that of Malone, *l'innommable* and the mysterious Mahood (or perhaps, Worm?) with whom he is in some curious, indefinable relationship (if he is not himself Mahood or even Worm), suggests the dualism of the body-soul relationship.

6.

The dualism is innate. The soul finds itself burdened with the impossible weight of the body:

"How the pure Spirit" says Joseph Glanvill in the *Vanity of Dogmatizing* "is united to this Clod, is a knot for fallen Humanity to untie . . . How should a thought be united to a marble statue, or a sun-beam to a lump of clay! The freezing of the words in the air in the northern clime, is as conceivable as this strange union . . . And to hang weights on the wings of the wind seems far more intelligible".

Mr. Beckett's characters are not even sure of their identity: they cannot be certain to which marble-statue or lump of clay they have been united. The whole world of reality—the strange, murky prison of *L'Innommable*, where "they" mutter continually and threateningly around the "I" is, at the least, a quasi-mirage. Between the "I" (uncertain whether he is really "I") and the non-"I", there is, in the end, no link. Will is an illusion and can make no real contact with the outside world.

7.

Arnold Geulincx, a Belgian philosopher who pushed one part of Descartes's metaphysics to its illogical conclusion, announced a dictum to which Murphy, explicitly, and the other of Mr. Beckett's

characters, implicitly, pay allegiance—*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*—“where you can do nothing, do not will anything”. The artist cannot *effect* or *affect* anything in this sordid world. Therefore he should not delude himself into thinking that he can be an influence—that he can reform or change. To leave a strange, almost inexplicable monument, like Ozymandias, is as much as he can do. Humility and retirement is the only valid position. *Partes humilitatis sunt duea: inspectio sui et despactio sui* says Geulinex. The Beckett hero lying inert on his bed, or a captive trunk like a new Billy-in-the-Bowl, conducts remorselessly his inspection and “despection” of himself.

This withdrawal from the world of colour and activity leads to a strange world of the ruminative cenobite. The withdrawal can be chronologically plotted in Mr. Beckett's books. From *More Pricks Than Kicks* to *L'Innommable* there is the pilgrimage to the lone and desolate foothills of Purgatory. The puppets that dance so twinklingly for Belacqua Shuah have become mere shadows—but threatening shadows—for the Unnameable.

The end, if it is an end, could be described as hopeless, if hope had ever existed in the Beckett world. One can do nothing, one can will nothing—it is the cul-de-sac of the will:

“Il n'y a qu'à attendre, sans rien faire, ca ne sert à rien, sans rien comprendre, ca n'avance à rien, et tout s'arrange, rien ne s'arrange, rien, rien, ca na finira jamais, cette voix ne s'arrêtera jamais, je suis seul ici, le premier et le dernier, je n'ai fait souffrir personne, je n'ai mis fin aux souffrances de personne, personne ne viendra mettre fin aux miennes, ils ne s'en iront jamais, je ne bougerai jamais, je n'aurai jamais la paix.

(*L'Innommable*)¹

In Mr. Beckett's works, everybody is waiting. Waiting for what? Many critics have suggested the obvious in relation to *En attendant Godot* that it is God that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for.² But have they, no more than Belacqua³ got as near to God as all that? Have they even come to the stage of repentance that will make them admissible to Purgatory?

¹ There is nothing for it but to wait, doing nothing, that would be of no use, understanding nothing, that would get nowhere, and everything is all right, nothing is all right, nothing, nothing, it will never end, this voice will never stop, I am alone here, the first and the last, I never made anyone suffer, I never put an end to anyone's sufferings, nobody will come to end mine, they will never go away, I shall never move. I shall never have peace.

² A Godot appears previously in French Literature, in the novel *Monsieur Godot intime* and others by Marcel Jouhandeau. In *Monsieur Godot intime* he conducts, (lying Beckett-wise, in bed) an “inspection and despection” of himself that is as exhaustive as any of Mr. Beckett's. There may be a clue here worth following up.

³ Estragon is discovered as the curtain rises on *En attendant Godot* in a position similar to that of Belacqua in the Ante-Purgatory.

"Vladimir—Gogo

Estragon—Quoi

Vladimir—Si on se repentait?"

Estragon—De quoi?

Vladimir—Eh bien . . . (Il cherche.) On n'aurait pas besoin d'entrer dans les détails.

Estragon—D'être né?"

Vladimir has been talking of the penitent thief—a symbol that occurs elsewhere in Beckett's work—"Car à quoi bon se décourager, il y eut un larron de sauvé & a fait un joli pourcentage" (*Malone Meurt* p. 153). The world is one of chance and a fifty-per-cent. risk is as good as you will get. And even at that it is not quite clear what is repentance and what is damnation or salvation.

"*Vladimir—On dit que l'un fut sauvé et l'autre . . . (il cherche le contraire de sauvé) . . . damné.*

*Estragon—De quoi?*¹

Is, perhaps, the salvation to be found in repentance salvation from the primal damnation of being born? It was Belacqua Shuah's illustrious ancestor Bildad the Shuhite who propounded the gloomy doctrine:

"How can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even the moon hath no brightness, and the stars are not pure in His sight: How much less man, that is a worm! and the son of man which is a worm."² (Job XXV 4-6).

All of Mr. Beckett's characters are imprisoned in the uncleanliness of life. In what unnameable jail is the Unnameable immured, round which "they" flicker muttering and mouthing and glaring through the judas? Is there any likely release, as there is for Belacqua, who must wait on the slopes of the Mountain of Purgatory for the space of his life on earth? Will the innate corruption of the body ever be completely sloughed off though the Unnameable has, apparently, sloughed off most of his?

The progression is, perhaps, cyclic. The succession of servants in the house of Mr. Knott gives the effect of an infinite series joined at both ends—though their identities, like their duties, are uncertain. The Unnameable, despite his anguished plunges into near-extinction, surges up again and again into the bestiality of existence. Though *Malone Meurt* (and the title is, apparently,

1 The ambiguity of the situation—an ambiguity that must be dear to Mr. Beckett's heart—is that the story of the Penitent Thief is recounted only by one (Mark) of the Four Evangelists. The other three give no indication of any difference between the fate of the two thieves. The names of the thieves, as given in the apocryphal gospels, vary considerably, too—Desmes and Gismas or Dimas and Gismas (*Acta Pilati*) Gemas and Gestas (*Gospel of Nicodemus*) Titus and Dimachus (*Gospel of the Infancy*) and so on.

2 MacMann=Worm, perhaps?

conclusive) ends with dubious finality—"plus rien", *L'Innommable* shows no suspension of the cycle¹ ". . . il faut continuer, je vaois continuer". The two acts of *En attendant Godot* present basically the same action and the end brings us back to the beginning. Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting and will continue to wait for Godot.

Mr. Beckett has already laid great stress on the importance of Vico in the work of Joyce² and it is not unlikely that a similar influence exists in his own, and that a cyclical pattern could be established by the Beckett-student as it has painstakingly been laid out by the earnest Joycean. Whether it would lead to much enlightenment is another matter.

8.

Such is Mr. Beckett's world—a strange one with decreasing contact with reality—a world where the will fails because it can avail nothing (*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*). It is a world of disgust and loathsomeness. "This I am happy to inform you is the reversed metamorphosis" (*Watt* p. 44), Beauty into the Beast. For Mr. Beckett has created a new world, with sparse and repulsive furnishings, it is true, but a new individual world, in which the "I" paces back and forward without relief, insulated from the trivialities of the outside world where men love, drink, laugh, weep—together.

The maddening repetitions and alternations which fill tedious pages of Mr. Beckett's work (the six-page "breakdown" in *Watt*, for instance, of the idea that the committee-men "looked at one another") seem to be part of his deliberate process of disintegration of the familiar world. As he examines a thing, an idea or an action, it seems to lose shape and fall apart. Under the hypnotic eye, reality no longer seems real. *Chi non ha la forza di uccidere la realtà non ha la forza di crearla*.

The co-ordinates of Mr. Beckett's world are not those we are used to. But, at some level they must cut across those of our own world. The asymptote in one set of co-ordinates appears to be a tangent in the other.

This, coupled with Mr. Beckett's deliberate ambiguity,

¹ On the assumption that *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt* and *L'Innommable* form a trilogy, it might be hazarded that the being (or beings) successively known as Molloy and Moran, Malone and MacMann, Mahood, Worm and the Unnameable is (or are) undergoing some cyclical form of purgation—or partial purgation. A spiral, perhaps, of which the apex is Nirvana, or what-have-you?

² Though one is tempted to ask (and the enquiry extends to Mr. Beckett's works also) whether if there had not been a Vico Road in Dublin, this musty old Italian philosopher would ever have been dusted off. And if Messrs. Browne and Nolan's had been Messrs. Jones and Smith, would Joyce have had so much to say about Giordano Bruno of Nola?

makes interpretation of his work peculiarly difficult.¹ The validity of any interpretation must be open to the gravest of suspicions. Thus, for instance, who are Pozzo and Lucky in *En attendant Godot*? With complete lack of confidence I suggest —Dante and Virgil? Quixote and Sancho? Shem and Shaun? Or perhaps Pozzo and Lucky?

“Don’t come down the ladder, I have taken it away”. The old joke (which Mr. Beckett uses twice) is a useful warning. The critic who too confidently erects an elaborate superstructure of interpretation is liable, when he steps back to admire it, to experience the disturbing feeling of someone who has tried to descend a ladder that isn’t there.

Mr. Beckett’s work swarms with possibilities for symbols. The bowler hat which appears to be the only recognised headwear for his characters is one. All four characters in *En attendant Godot* wear bowler hats. MacMann in *Malone Meurt* clutches his bowler hat as an integral part of his own being. Cooper, in *Murphy*, cannot remove his bowler hat, until his re-birth after the death of Murphy. Is the bowler hat the caul and is it connected with the foetal position of Belacqua? Or is there some significance in the French “*chapeau melon*”?

“No symbols, where none intended” says Mr. Beckett himself and the warning is salutary, if difficult of application. To seek for meanings, to find what Mr. Beckett’s work is all about, is a risky and hazardous enterprise which, one can feel sure, will not lack for intrepid Americans to undertake it, in the future. But it is worth pondering his own words about Joyce. “His writing is not about something—it is that something itself.”

To repeat, Mr. Beckett’s world is a self-contained world and one interpretable only in terms of itself. Any other interpretations must be indirect, allusive and couched perhaps in that triumph of literary obliquity invented by Mr. James Thurber’s Chanda Bell—the triple negative². Whether the hazards and discomfort of space-travel to Mr. Beckett’s world are worth it, is another matter.

En attendant Godot is the most painless and diverting of the rewards, *L’Innommable* probably the most valuable. But one cannot help feeling that his work so far is, like *Finnegans Wake*, not worth all that much trouble. As a “thing-in-itself” it is likely to be respected but by-passed.

¹ Recent Irish attempts at elucidation (A. J. Leventhal: *Irish Times*, 24th December, 1953, and Sebastian Ryan: *Icarus*, November, 1953) have been of little, if any, help. Nor have most of the French critics who have written enthusiastically on the subject.

² (e.g. “not unmeaningless”).

Poetry Ireland 24

EDITED BY DAVID MARCUS

EWART MILNE

Two Poems

MAURICE IRVINE

The Liverpool Boat

GORDON WHARTON

The Plague

EWART MILNE

The Old Ship

Break from the cold inertia of past time,
Break into light
Of all imponderable stars and harvests home, be unmuffled, heart!
Neither my life nor my death
Speak in the slow bell that does not pause or quicker
For all the roaring tides and the millrace of Cape Wrath.

Wind from the South, wind from the North, wind turnabout!
We are losing way, we are losing way,
In an uncanny silence the ship rolls and the combers drive inshore ;
The port watch goes off and the after watch comes on,
A spanner falls, clatters in the engineroom, strikes, explodes,
Startles the rigging gulls who seem to know something's wrong
And mute their sunset song ;

Then the screw turns, the slow pulsing beat begins again,
The second officer leans over the bridge with the first engineer
Arguing about the Stone of Scone—
Come, let us immortalise Scotland's Own—
And the ship moves, slowly gathers way,
The sun goes under the sea, and Mananaan McLir steps into his
chariot !

Now the sky's a fading harp with drifting broken strings !
O captain, captain, drinking dog-watch tea,
Remember shipwreck, remember Rockall, remember the reef,
The spike not shown on Mercator's projections, the tooth
That juts in the quiet mind, cuts with a madman's scream.

This is the old ship, the old voyage,
 Lawrence's Ship of Death, well under way,
 Traven's Hellship, that never makes the home run,
 The ship I left;
 I see her now with her rusty funnel painted over,
 And her crew, wearing gabardines and peak caps,
 Peer through the stars and bars, and push past me in the street!

Night's timbers fall apart;
 They become a press-gang, run up the Black Flag,
 A whistle shrills in silence but no dice for me, win game or lose;
 And now I stumble along the Wharf of sheds and ships,
 I will not go on this voyage.
 I will not go
 I will never go;
 Closer they surge, and head me off from dockland's freedom gates,
 But always, when they are about to seize me, I awake,
 And know them for the dead.

Kitty Alone And I

When first I plied the poet's trade
 They laughed who heard my high-pitched scraping,
 The stripling's note was not for them—
 Nor yet for Katie's troubled dreaming:
 Said I, Laredo's looking gloomy, as up the street I went.

Gay go up and gay come down
 Sang all the birds of Dublin Town,
 Who walks the gap of Hell and Howth
 Must take the dark and wring its throat.

I made my poem I hammered out
 The pattern of my craft's designing,
 While Katie slept and dreamed I made
 A brand new garter for her stocking:
 Said I, Laredo's looking brighter, as down the street I went.

Gay go up and gay come down
 Sang all the birds of Dublin Town,
 Who takes the dark and wrings its throat
 Will find a ferry and a ferryboat.

When Katie wakes, though I be gone,
 She'll find two brand new garters circling
 The troubled limbs I slipped them on
 When watchdogs all were drunk or snoring!
 Said I, Laredo's looking lovely, as from the street I went.

Gay go up and gay come down
 On Dublin Town on Dublin Town
 I took the dark and wrung its throat:
 I found a ferry and a ferryboat.

MAURICE IRVINE

The Liverpool Boat

Groaning at the moorings, her time come upon her
 Ropes loosed, gangways down, cables broken,
 Slowly and painfully she moves from the quayside
 Down the dark channel, past the warehouses and the gantries
 Harsh matrix, hiding love in discipline
 Delivered at last from the reluctant womb
 To the wide lough, waters of innocence.
 Her birth pangs forgotten, she skips in delight
 Breasting the waves with childlike confidence
 Heading in eagerness for the open sea.
 But still on either side run the anxious coastlines
 Under a pall of rain, stretching imploring hands
 Antrim and Down, mother and father.
 Standing by the side, feeling the harsh wind from the sea
 I watch the lights go up and fall away
 In the little towns, among the fields, on the hillsides
 And see beyond them with the eye of memory
 The net of field and bog, mountain and river
 Going north and south, cunningly knit
 And all its threads held taut and quivering
 Converging in the knot of bitterness.
 Gladly I leave you ; gladly would I abjure
 Your suffocating love, your sterile hate
 And all your stark unbearable history.
 A foolish wish ; your net has held me fast
 I bear your seal as the marked bird its ring
 And to your strict bureaucracy of pain
 Pay the accustomed due.
 The wind blows cold ; the white wave and the dark
 Reject the seabird's desolating cry
 Shivering I go below ; gladly I meet
 The warm synthetic welcome of the bar.

GORDON WHARTON

The Plague

The plague walked on the wrong side of the mountain,
through every house, following the whores,
in the land with one dried river and a dying tree,
in and out of every bed, in and out of doors.

The children cried, Stop, the children cried,
but the world was too far away,
and I was out walking with my hungry sister
finding words to express decay.

On the mountain's other side, the children
bruised the sky with words,
but the world was on heat for a strawberry blonde,
following the birds.

The plague walked on a thousand legs,
spawning for hours of the day and night,
and the children grew blisters under their armpits
that spread like potato blight.

I have been there, to the wrong side of the mountain,
and I have seen the vegetable, Death,
growing on the lips of children,
strangling their breath.

There the houses have broken doors,
the hinges stuck with rust,
and in every corner of the aching rooms
voices say only dust.

I have been there with my hungry sister,
finding words to express despair,
while the world was randy for a certain cloud
treading the unsure air.

Written in my left-handed book
are cruel words enough, and some beside ;
while I was walking with my sister,
the children died. Stop. The children died.

BOOK REVIEWS

LIFE ARBOREAL by Ewart Milne. The Pound Press. 9/6

Mr. Milne's poem, "Three" in this new volume of his seems to me to give in little the qualities of his work as a whole. There is the same mixture of concentration and odd diffusion, the same mixture of careful craftsmanship and sudden fecklessness, the same mixture of brilliance and opacity. Thus the first ten verses are beautifully wrought with the minimum of technical aids; the next four are an amalgam of unharnessed fancies and dubious cracks ("So I gave him a free state funeral"). In the final two stanzas, an effort is made to retrieve the situation but the total effect has been spoiled, mainly because Mr. Milne, I think, doesn't revise enough.

Yet this book is by far and away the best volume he has produced and the reader leaves it down with a feeling of satisfaction. Mr. Milne's gift is narrative and descriptive, not intellectually analytical, and he gives it more rein now than he has hitherto given it. The poems about young Magrath and Clancy, for instance, as well as *Artificer*, *Harvest*, *Four Seasons*, *The Autumn of Our Days*, *Anna Livia's Country*, *Winter Mild*, leave an impact long after one has read them, and their technical excellences lead one to believe that these are the poems upon which Mr. Milne has spent a good deal of time and thought. It is a pity about the poem which I mentioned above, "Three," because I have the feeling that in it Mr. Milne was attempting something bigger than he has attempted before; perhaps, however, we shall see it again in its true guise. At all events, I recommend this volume sincerely to those who have in the past admired this fine Irish poet.

Valentin Iremonger.

5 ★

HONEY SEEMS BITTER by Benedict Kiely.

Methuen. 12/6

A year ago I reviewed the American edition of this book in these pages. Re-read now, it was as readable as ever. But I can now see more clearly why I made mental reservations about this literary murder-story.

The book is *too* literary. Kiely himself is one of the most formidably well-read men I ever met, expert apparently in all the bypaths of literature as well as the main road of the classics which we are all supposed to have read (but usually haven't). In *Honey Seems Bitter* he has chosen for his narrator a man for whom literature is the real and only thing. For Donagh Hartigan, the Civil Servant recovering from a breakdown, Malory, Marcus Aurelius, Eustache Deschamps, these and the other inhabitants of his "four shelves of books" are the real people, and the living are seen through a veil of literature. We admire them, we are interested in them, but we cannot touch them, nor can they touch us. It is a tribute to the vitality of the living, and the quality of the writing, that even at third-hand they can interest us so strongly.

From its viewpoint the book is entirely consistent. I only wish that it had been written from the viewpoint of Jim Walsh, the "spoiled priest" with the one shaky lung, who is hanged for a murder he did not commit, just because nobody cared enough about him to tell the truth—least of all himself. That would have been life, at first hand, in the raw. But it would have also been quite another book (though perhaps greater), and we should be thankful enough for what we have.

Maurice Kennedy.

26

ART O GRIOMA, by Seán O

Lúing. Sáirséal & Dill. 25/-

There is here a vast amount of well-arranged fact relating to Griffith and his milieu not accessible in works published in English. This book sustains the notion that there was but one Sinn Féin, with Griffith as its very great prophet. Its first four chapters should, however, be read with Moran's "Philosophy of Irish Ireland." Moran, most tenacious critic of Griffith's Own Sinn Féin, sold his "Leader" at a 1901 Horse Show booth carrying the Motto, Sinn Féin.

The abridged translated version of Griffith's 1905 Rotunda Address is not "sourced," but the listed Griffith writings include "The S.F. Policy" (1907), subsequent reprints of which differed from the original, and in particular, omitted the significant phrase, "the cowardice of the Irish capitalist is proverbial."

Scant justice is done to that towering genius of the critical early-1917 interval—Count Plunkett, who with unique trust in the nation's youth, founded Liberty Clubs for the resumption of the military struggle; and with rare political sagacity, set his countrymen to think of "Ireland and the Peace Conference" (thus sterilising the Convention disorder) No small man Plunkett; and so, the remark (page 279) "Bhi amhras ar Art O Griofa faoin bPluincéadach" blemishes otherwise careful, if enthusiastic and occasionally apocalyptic, biography.

"Subscription-paying I.R.B. men joined S.F. Clubs" (p289). Naively true, but where these transfusions worked, the said clubs became what Plunkett had meant his Liberty Clubs to be, their positions being generally identifiable on the locus of points where fighting units later emerged.

The Wexford Strike incident-recital omits its leadership by P. T. Daly, prominent early Sinn Féiner.

Copious translation is of a piece with the original writing, and dating of incident is extensive, the ensemble making facile reading in pleasing, rarely-obscure Irish of a carefully-printed, artistically-produced work.

S.L.

THE KING OF FRIDAY'S
MEN, by M. J. Molloy.

Duffy.

5/-

I had written a notice of this play when I started to re-read an article, "The Dramatic Arrival of M. J. Molloy" by Temple Lane, which appeared some years ago in *Irish Writing* (May, 1950), and finding what I had written so much a paraphrase, and a poor one, of certain paragraphs in that article, I decided to give instead some extracts from the latter, risking the effects of their removal from context.

Writing of *The King*, with its tallywomen and shillelagh-fighting, Miss Lane describes it as "historical but (in effect) timeless. It is never a costume-drama . . . Truth and beauty are here, hand-in-hand with the awareness of vice and violence, with the added strength that the dramatist's simplicity is never *naïve*.

"Molloy's amazing achievement is to create, in the teeth of fashionable, mistaken sophistication, a personality, the champion fighter, who . . . has gentleness as the whole strength of his character: a character which *Dublin Opinion* declared in November, 1948, [period of first production] 'haunts our memory, and is so fine that we hope he will continue to haunt it'. The same commentator commends the 'wild picturesqueness' of the play. But the whole drama is built up on a steel framework which never sags. That framework is conviction in the positive value of strong and gentle goodness even in a fighting world.

"This Bartley, and the peasants who surround him, are encased in permanent importance by the amber of poetic daily speech." Miss Lane goes on to praise as further memorable features the tender love scene in Act II and the character of Gaisceen, "the likeable, slippery time-server, whose acceptance of the status quo in Act I, has a matter-of-fact realism which drew comments from at least one Irish newspaper after the first performance." Our critic finds the last Act faulty. "Yet through it all shines the glory and urgency of the dramatist's will, so that this is not just another play about the downtrodden dispossessed. The country folk, no larger than life, seem yet to be larger." T.S.

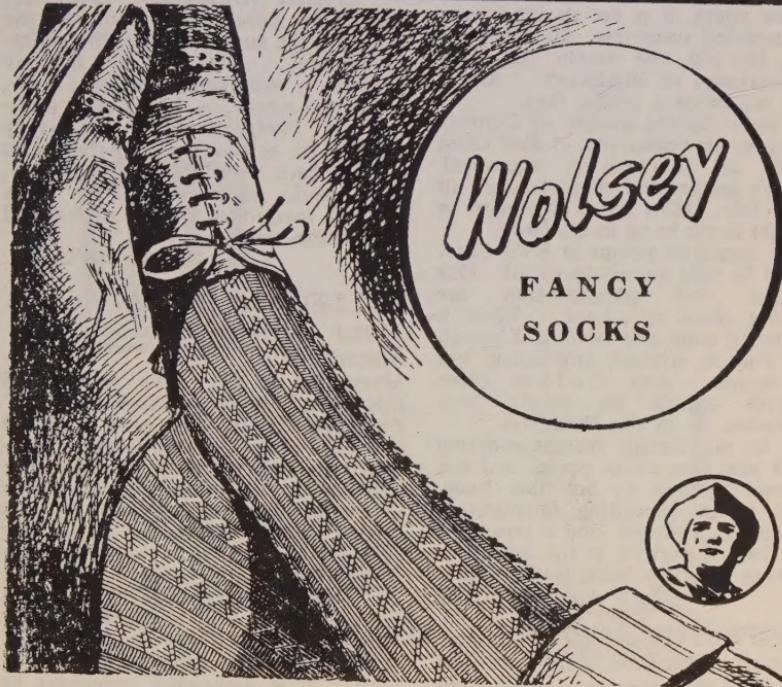
BENEDICT KIELY

HONEY SEEMS BITTER

'It's good. The fine swinging prose comes lilting and easy and effective, the rhythm of language and feeling is natural and satisfactory, and all the people . . . are true and pitiful.' MARGHANITA LASKI (Observer)

METHUEN

12/6



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**THE COLLECTED POEMS
OF PADRAIC COLUM.**

Devin-Adair.

\$5

Writing about this volume, I feel, somehow, the exultance of the good patriot, extolling his own country. For Padraic Colum's poetry is as much part of Ireland as her hills and trees and streams and stones. The Gaelic ideal of beauty is a spiritual one. Colum shows a great love and understanding of old age. If he praises youth, it is for its innocence, its unspoiled sweetness. He pities the poor, the old, the lonely; he pities the weakness of childhood: "And a child has often a pitiful face."

A most sterling quality of Colum's poetry is its objectivity. Self often makes art obscure, equivocal. Colum's images and characters are all quite clear. How the *Weltschmerz* is brought home to us in *Gildroy*.

The immortal poems in *Wild Earth* should be well known to us all. Our children and grandchildren are learning them at school. What a wonderful song *She Walked Through The Fair* is, without any music but the words. And Colum often succeeds outside his purely Irish inspiration, as in the *Wild Ass*.

It is my strong recommendation to all who care about poetry and our national heritage to buy this book. There is an interesting introduction by John L. Sweeney, and a reproduction from a portrait of the author as a young man, by John Butler Yeats. *Blanaid Salkeld.*

PERSPECTIVES NO. 5.

Hamish Hamilton, Ltd.

2/6

This issue of *Perspectives* is edited by Malcolm Cowley, and in his introductory article Mr. Cowley raises, once more, the significant and alarming question, 'where are the creative writers?' His answer, that they have become critics, does not altogether banish our fears, for as he says, 'What the critics need to-day is new novels, new poems, new dramas . . .' and if the critic is the creative writer, where is the new grist coming from?

The fears diminish, if not disappear, on reading Richard Gay's story, *Isham Street*, which is densely written, and is an example of the work that comes from what might be

called 'the School of Modern Pessimism.' The other story, *Torch Song*, by John Cheever, comes from the same school, but is inferior because too obviously contrived.

Conrad Aiken contributes a characteristic poem, *The Changing Mind*, which poses the question, 'What is it that I inherit?', and is an exercise in self-analysis, or 'self-dissection' as Henry A. Murray calls it. Mr. Murray's essay on Aiken, *The Poet of Creative Dissolution*, does not satisfy me because his premise 'the writer is the supersensitive, the super-perceptive . . . one' — is, in my opinion, a mistakenly romantic view.

On the whole, as I said, this number of *Perspectives* is satisfactory despite its eclecticism. Articles on Shakespeare, Architecture, Sociology, and music, as well as the items already mentioned, make varied and interesting reading.

Gordon Wharton.

**COLLECTED POEMS By
James Stephens.**

Macmillan.

15/-

Macmillan & Co. have just issued this second edition of James Stephens' *Collected Poems* and have included in it ten poems not previously published in book form. As the poet explains in his preface (written for the original 1926 edition) he discarded a great number of poems but retained some 'that were almost universally condemned'. Amongst the latter he mentions 'The Main-Deep' — which, in conversation, he once characterised as 'the only poem in the English language without a verb'. It is somewhat surprising to learn that this perfect little picture was 'almost universally condemned', for it was this poem, with 'The Snare', which, in the pages of a school poetry-book, constituted my first introduction to James Stephens' work. But perhaps it is the very poetry one has to learn at school that later on stands the greatest chance of being condemned! At any rate, here, once again, one meets 'The Main-Deep' along with so many other favourites by a poet who was one of Ireland's greatest and whose poetry, delicate but durable, has perennial beauty.

D.M.